ALL STORIES NEW... NO REPRINTS

RANCH ROMANCES

25c

FIRST MARCH NUMBER

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEATURING

THE LONER
by J. L. Bouma

SUSPICION
by Stephen Payne

We'll train & establish you in

Your Own Business

. . . even if now employed

We are enlarging this 27-year-old world-wide chain of Duraclean dealerships. Many excellent locations are still available in the U.S.A., Canada, and other countries. If you are reliable and diligent, this is an opportunity to increase your income . . . and have the freedom, financial independence, and prestige of YOUR OWN business.

These are full time dealerships . . . but you can start in spare time and have a profitable, lifetime business when your present job ends. A Duraclean dealer will train and assist you. He'll reveal his successful, proven methods and sales plans. He'll **work with you.**

Alert dealers can average $5 hourly gross profit on service they render plus $3 on EACH service-man at National Price Guide charges. This business is **easy** to learn . . . quickly established.

You Become an Expert in cleaning and protecting Rugs and Upholstery

DURACLEAN cleans by *absorption.* It eliminates scrubbing . . soaking . . shrinkage. Aerated foam, created by electric Foamovator, restores natural lubrication in rugs and upholstery. Dirt, grease and many unsightly spots vanish. Fabrics and floor coverings are cleaned with *a new consideration for their life and beauty.*

This modern process avoids strong soaps and machine scrubbing eliminating unnecessary wear and breaking of fibers. Fabric life is increased. **DURACLEANING** is done *in the home.* Customers like this convenience. Fabrics dry in a few hours. Rug pile again stands erect and even. Brilliant colors revive. Furnishings become clean, fresh and enlivened.

DURAPROOF is another year 'round service rendered in the home, office or institution — *without removing furnishings.* It protects upholstery, rugs, furs, clothing and auto interiors against damage by moths and carpet beetles. U.S. Government says **"Moths are present in practically every household . . . No section of country seems free from such infestations."** **DURAPROOF** kills moths and carpet beetles . . . It makes materials non-eatable to both. **DURAPROOF** is backed by an International 6-year Warranty.

Easy to Learn • No Overhead Expense

Permanent, Growing Market

Service is rendered **IN** homes, offices, hotels, theaters, institutions and to revive used-car upholstery for auto dealers. There is need for these services in almost every building. Duraclean dealers operate from their home, an office or shop, as they prefer. It's **easy to learn** . . . we quickly train you. Rendering service yourself, at first, prepares you to train and supervise service men.

Repeat and Voluntary Orders

Demonstrations win new customers. DURACLEAN Dealers find REPEAT and VOLUNTARY orders a major source of income. Customers, enthused with results, tell friends and neighbors. Furniture and department stores and others turn over rug and upholstery cleaning and mothproofing to **DURACLEAN** Dealers. We show you 27 ways to get new customers.

We Help YOU Grow

Our **MUTUAL COOPERATION** program gives you many unique and continuous advantages: **National Advertising** in Life, McCalls, House & Gardens, Canadian Homes & Gardens and a dozen others. **Copyright and trademark** protection. **Certificate** approves equipment and materials. **Products Insurance. Six-year Warranty. Pocket Demonstrators. Sales Book. Advertising Folders & Cards. Tested Ads. Ad Cuts & Mats Store Display Cards. Radio & TV Musical Commercials.** Home Show **Booth Display. Publicity Program** gets FREE local newspaper stories. **Prizes. Laboratory** research and development. **Monthly magazine. Resale Service. Annual Conventions.** Behind all this is a **27 YEAR OLD** headquarters interested in YOUR personal success. If you want to become the owner of a **DURACLEAN** Service business, you should inquire now, TODAY, while territory is still available.

What Dealers Say

W. Lookiebill: We've had 20 years of pleasant dealings. I'm 65 but am setting my sights for 20 more years.
Gerald Merriman: $700 cleaning . . only 13 working days. P. D. Freidinger: 70% of our business is repeat.
A. Ullman: Every demonstration has been a sale.
Ellsworth: Your advertising certainly has paid dividends.
M. Lassanske: Original investment returned in two months. Not sorry I started 'on a shoe string.'
R. Kimbrough: Finished First White House of Confederacy and am to Duracle n the Governor's Mansion.
Margare'te Turner: Took in $106 in 15 or 18 hours.
L. Johnson: Each customer leads to 3 or 4 more.

EASY TERMS

A moderate payment establishes **your own** business—pay balance from sales. We furnish electric machines, folders, store cards, introduction slips, sales book, demonstrators and **enough material to return your TOTAL investment.**

COMMENDED BY THE CONSUMER SERVICE BUREAU OF PARENTS' MAGAZINE

FIRST PROCESS IN THE FIELD TO WIN THIS IMPORTANT HONOR!

As a **Duraclean** dealer, your services are backed by this famous seal of quality . . . proof that **Duraclean** has passed rigorous tests. No competitor in your town can boast this seal. **Duraclean** has also been tested and certified by the American Research & Testing Laboratories. No wonder it's so easy to get business!

FREE Booklet

Our first letter and illustrated booklet will explain everything — the two modern, urgently needed services, waiting market, how business grows, your large profit, easy terms and PROTECTED territory. Clip and mail coupon today! **Get all the facts . . . no obligation.**

Duraclean Co.

7-693 Duraclean Bldg. linois

"OWN a Business" Coupon

DURACLEAN CO., 7-693 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

Without obligation to me, send booklet and letter giving full details. Tell me how I may OWN a growing business of my own built upon satisfied customers.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

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30 DAYS SUPPLY

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MINERALS AND AMINO ACID

25 proven ingredients—11 Vitamins (including Blood-Building B_{12} and Folic Acid), 11 Minerals, Choline, Inositol and Methionine

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Yes, we want to send you FREE a 30-day supply of high-potency *Vitasafe C.F. Capsules* (a $5.00 value) so you can discover for yourself how much healthier, happier and peppier you may feel after a few days' trial! Each capsule supplies your body with well over the minimum adult daily needs of the 11 important vitamins, plus 11 minerals, choline, inositol and amino acid.

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Vitamin C	75 mg.
Vitamin B_1	5 mg.
Vitamin B_2	2.5 mg.
Vitamin B_6	0.5 mg.
Vitamin B_{12}	1 mcg.
Niacin Amide	40 mg.
Calcium Pantothenate	4 mg.
Vitamin E	2 I.U.
Folic Acid	0.5 mg.
Calcium	75 mg.
Phosphorus	58 mg.
Iron	30 mg.
Cobalt	0.04 mg.
Copper	0.45 mg.
Manganese	0.5 mg.
Molybdenum	0.1 mg.
Iodine	0.075 mg.
Potassium	2 mg.
Zinc	0.5 mg.
Magnesium	3 mg.
Choline Bitartrate	81.4 mg.
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dl-Methionine	10 mg.

Compare this formula with any other!

Potency and Purity Guaranteed

You can use these Capsules confidently because strict U. S. Government regulations demand that you get exactly what the label states—pure ingredients whose beneficial effects have been proven time and time again!

Amazing New Plan Slashes Vitamin Prices in Half

With your free vitamins, we will send you complete details of an amazing new plan that provides you with a 30-day supply of vitamins every month for just $2.00—60% less than the usual retail price . But remember—*you're not obligated to buy from us now or ever!* The supply of free capsules is limited—so mail coupon today!

VITASAFE CORPORATION

43 West 61st St., New York 23 N. Y.

VITASAFE CORP., Dept. 341A-1

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Please send me free a 30-day supply of the proven VITASAFE CF (Comprehensive Formula) Capsules, and full information about the VITASAFE Plan. I am not under any obligation to buy any additional vitamins, and after trying my free sample supply, I may accept the benefits and substantial savings offered by the VITASAFE Plan, or if not fully satisfied will reject them. In any case, the trial month's supply of 30 VITASAFE Capsules is mine to use free.

I ENCLOSE 25¢ (coins or stamps) to help pay for packing and postage.

Name.....

Address.....

City.....Zone.....State.....

This offer is limited to those who have never before taken advantage of this generous trial. Only one trial supply per family.

33rd Year
OF PUBLICATION

FIRST
MARCH NUMBER
February 22, 1957
Volume 203, No. 2

RANCH ROMANCES

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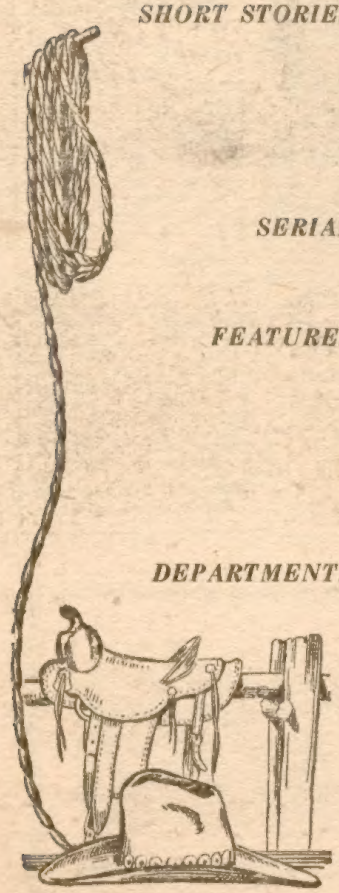

HELEN TONO
Editor

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I WILL TRAIN YOU AT HOME FOR GOOD PAY JOBS IN RADIO-TELEVISION

J. E. SMITH has trained more men for Radio-Television than any other man. OUR 40th YEAR.

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You Good Pay—Bright Future—Security

I TRAINED THESE MEN

Training plus opportunity is the PERFECT COMBINATION for job security, good pay, advancement. In good times, the trained man makes the BETTER PAY, GETS PROMOTED. When jobs are scarce, the trained man enjoys GREATER SECURITY. NRI training can help assure you more of the better things of life.

"Started to repair sets six months after enrolling. Earned $12 to $15 a week in spare time."—Adam Kramlik, Jr., Sunneytown, Pennsylvania.

"Up to our necks in Radio-Television work. Four other NRI men work here. Am happy with my work."—Glen Peterson, Bradford, Ont., Canada.

"Am doing Radio and Television Servicing full time. Now have my own shop. I owe my success to N.R.I."—Curtis Stath, Ft. Madison, Iowa.

"Am with WCOC. NRI course can't be beat. No trouble passing 1st class Radio-phone license exam."—Jesse W. Parker, Meridian, Mississippi.

"By the time I graduated I had paid for my course, a car and testing equipment. Can service toughest jobs."—E. J. Streitenberger, New Boston, Ohio.

Start Soon to Make $10, $15 a Week Extra Fixing Sets

Keep your job while training. I start sending you special booklets the day you enroll, that show you how to fix sets. Multitester built with parts I send helps you make $10, $15 a week extra fixing sets while training. Many start their own Radio-Television business with spare time earnings.

My Training Is Up-To-Date

You benefit by my 40 years' experience training men at home. Well illustrated lessons give you basic principles you need. Skillfully developed kits of parts I send (see below) "bring to life" things you learn from lessons.

AVAILABLE TO VETERANS UNDER G.I. BILLS

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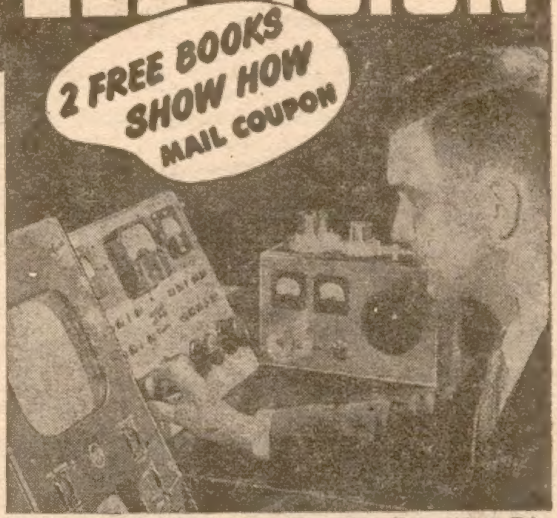
Nothing takes the place of PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. That's why NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING. You use parts I furnish to build many circuits common to Radio and Television. As part of my Communications Course, you build many circuits, including low power transmitter shown at left. You put it "on the air," perform procedures required of broadcast operators. With my Servicing Course you build modern Radio, etc.; use Multitester you build to make money fixing sets in spare time while training. You can stay at home, keep your job, learn Radio-TV in spare time at low cost. Mail coupon for book showing other equipment you build and keep.

The Tested Way To Better Pay!



Television Making Good Jobs, Prosperity—Even without Television, Radio is bigger than ever. 115 million home and auto Radios are big market for servicing. 3000 broadcasting stations use operators, technicians. Government, Aviation, Police, Ship, Micro-wave Relay, Two-way Radio Communications for buses, taxis, trucks, R. R. are growing fields. Television is moving ahead fast.

About 200 Television stations are now on the air. Hundreds of others being built. Good TV jobs opening up for Technicians, Operators, etc.

25 million homes now have Television sets. Thousands more are being sold every week. Get a job or have your own business selling, installing, servicing.

Radio-TV Needs Men of Action—Mail Coupon

Without obligating you in any way, I'll send an actual lesson to prove that my training is practical, thorough; 64-page book to show good job opportunities for you in Radio-TV. Terms for NRI training are as low as $5 a month. Many graduates make more in two weeks than total cost of training. Mail coupon now. J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 7CQ, Washington 9, D. C. OUR 40TH YEAR.

Good for Both—FREE

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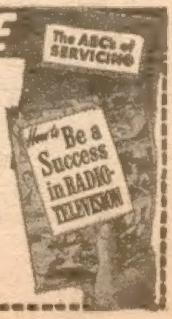
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.
Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book, FREE. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name.....Age.....

Address.....

City.....Zone....State.....

VETS write in date of discharge .....



South of the Border

Dear Editor:

I am a student attending high school in Mexico. I am 17 years old and rather tall. I wish to exchange culture with students from 15 to 17 years old, especially girls.

GONZALO ESCOBAR V

Libertad No. 215 Ote.
Col. Independencia
Monterrey, N.L., Mexico

Want Pen Pals

Dear Editor:

We are two men from Ceylon who would like to join your pen pal column. Benedict is 23 years old. He enjoys stamp collecting, reading, cycling, swimming, traveling, dancing and movies. Arthur enjoys the same, plus photography, music and acting. He is 21 years old. We are looking forward to receivnig many letters from the States and from Canada.

BENEDICT RAJANAYAGAM &
ARTHUR W. HUBERT

Benedict Rajanayagam
No. 206, Grand Pass Road
Colombo 14, Ceylon

Lonely Navy Man

Dear Editor:

I am in the Navy, and at times get very lonely. I am 19 years old, stand 5' 10½" tall, weigh 175 lbs., and have brown hair and eyes. I would like to hear from gals and guys about my age.

ROBERT PAYNE

USS Wiseman (DE 667)
c/o F.P.O.
San Francisco, California

Constant Reader

Dear Editor:

I have been a constant reader of RANCH ROMANCES for many years. I am a widower, 53 years old, and would like to correspond with anyone, regardless of age. I will answer all letters.

HOWARD ROUSSEAU

212½ W. Fulton Street
Edgerton, Wisconsin

Wants Letters From Faraway Lands

Dear Editor:

I am 11 years old, have brown hair and eyes, weigh 112 lbs., and enjoy stamp collecting, cycling, reading, and writing letters. I would like to hear from anyone, especially from those who live in faraway lands. I'll be watching my mail box.

LINDA BENNETT

Box 273
Valley, Washington

Likes Music

Dear Editor:

I am 24 years old, weigh 197 ibs., stand 6'2" tall, have blond hair and blue eyes. I enjoy sports and western music. I play the guitar, banjo and bass violin. I promise to answer all letters. Hope to see my mailbox full.

GENE J. HAWORTH

Route #2
Kettle Falls, Washington

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 32 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Enjoys Receiving Letters

Dear Editor:

I hope my letter is printed, as I enjoy writing and receiving letters and making new friends. I am married, and have a son 15 years old. My husband is a steam cleaning and painting contractor. I like hunting, and often go with my husband. I am also fond of dogs and horses. I'm 34 years old, 5' tall, weigh 121 lbs., have blonde hair and blue eyes. I would like to hear from everyone, and I will answer all letters. Will also exchange snapshots.

JOY GOAD

General Delivery
Hominy, Oklahoma

High School Senior

Dear Editor:

I'd appreciate your help in finding me correspondents who share my interest in any or all of the following: science fiction, popular music, and horses. I'm 17 years old, and a senior in high school. I stand 5'3" tall, weigh 110 lbs., have light brown hair and hazel eyes. I would especially like hearing from servicemen, but any letters would be appreciated and answered.

EVELYN RESKIN

6812 S. 124th Street
Seattle 88, Washington

School Teacher

Dear Editor:

I am a school teacher who would like to join your pen pal column. I am a new reader of RANCH ROMANCES and I really do enjoy the stories. I would like to hear from men, regardless of age, who share my interests. I teach journalism and English. My hobbies are collecting salt and pepper sets and ash trays, reading, records, and movies. I also enjoy baking cakes and cookies. I promise to answer all letters that I receive, and will exchange snapshots.

CLYDE DUCKWALL, JR.

1025 N.W. 19th
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

Lonely Sailor

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely sailor from Dallas, Texas. I am 20 years old, have blond hair and blue eyes, weigh 198 lbs., and stand 6'3" tall. I would like to hear from girls between the ages of 17 and 20 years old. Will answer all letters.

MELVIN L. DAVIS

U.S. Naval Hosp. Staff
Camp Pendleton, California

Likes Cooking

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES and "Our Air Mail" for a long time. I am 32 years old, weigh 125 lbs., stand 5'4" tall and have long curly auburn hair and blue eyes. My hobbies include cooking, writing letters, dancing, and pictures. I will answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots.

ETHEL LESLIE

Poplar Bluff, Missouri

Wants Letters

Dear Editor:

I would like to join your "Our Air Mail" column. I am single, 40 years old, have brown hair and hazel eyes, stand 6'1" tall, weigh 130 lbs., and wear glasses. I enjoy sports, movies, Western music, hiking, traveling and fishing. I would like to hear from everyone, especially from women about my own age.

EARL GAMBLE

21 Yard Avenue
Trenton 9, New Jersey

Skater

Dear Editor:

I would like to join "Our Air Mail" column. I am 15 years old, stand 5'2" tall, have brown hair and green eyes. My favorite hobbies are roller skating and dancing. I would like to hear from people between the ages of 15 to 25, from all over the world. I will exchange snapshots.

LETHA ANN KENDALL

1724 North Oregon Street
Ontario, Oregon

Longtime Reader

Dear Editor:

I have been reading RANCH ROMANCES for many years and think it is one of the finest magazines ever published. I hope you will find space in your column to print my letter, as I am very lonesome. I am 51 years old, stand 5'3" tall, weigh 120 lbs., have brown eyes and am partially bald. Will answer all letters I receive. Hoping to hear from the fair sex.

EDWARD W. WALLS

500 Winston Avenue
Baltimore 12, Maryland

Will Exchange Photos

Dear Editor:

I would like to join your column for pen pals, as I am very lonely. I would like to hear from everyone, especially from those about my age. I am 19 years old, stand 5'11" tall, and weigh 159 lbs. I will answer all letters, and will exchange photos.

CHARLES NETTLES JR.

Route 1, Box 39
Crosby, Mississippi

Gets Lonesome

Dear Editor:

I am 25 years old and am getting a divorce soon. I have a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter who my parents help me care for. I have brown hair and eyes, stand 4'9" tall, and weigh 105 lbs. I enjoy music, movies, and sewing. I would like to hear from everyone, as I get very lonesome. Looking forward to seeing my mailbox full.

VIRGINIA LYONS

P.O. Box 56
Huron, California

Likes Outdoor Life

Dear Editor:

I am a reader of RANCH ROMANCES and would like to hear from everyone, especially women. I am 29 years old, have black hair and brown eyes, stand 6', and weigh 150 lbs. I enjoy hunting, swimming, and family life. I hope to receive many interesting letters, and promise to answer anyone who writes.

ARTHUR MAYBERRY

c/o General Delivery
Crestview, Florida

Oil Man

Dear Editor:

I have been reading your magazine for some time. I am 32 years old, stand 6'3" tall, weigh 180 lbs., have brown hair and eyes, and am single. I work in an oil field and would like to correspond with women who are interested in farm life. I enjoy going to movies and listening to hillbilly music. I will answer all letters.

JIMMIE JENNINGS

General Delivery
Liberty, Texas

Five Lonely GI's

Dear Editor:

Our detachment is stationed in Pusan, Korea, and we are very lonely, as we do not receive much mail. We are five GI's ranging from 19 to 22 years old. Would really appreciate mail from girls between the ages of 17 to 25. Will exchange photos, and answer all letters we receive.

PFC. RAYMOND HALL
US 52404215
PFC. TERRIL FLANDERS
RA 26806670
PVT. ROGER POWELL
US 52404973
PVT. CLEVES R. GOLDING
US 22815838
PVT. FRANK GIORDANO
US 52399934

350th QM Bakery Det.
APO 59
San Francisco, California

At the regular single copy price, you'd pay $4.00 for the next 16 issues of RANCH ROMANCES. But use the coupon below and these same 16 exciting issues cost you only $2.99 . . . and you enjoy the convenience of having them delivered right to your door in the bargain.

It's the biggest reading value you can get—16 exciting novels . . . 16 more novelettes . . . 64 thrill-packed short-stories . . . the best in Western serials . . . Bob Cummings' Ranch Flicker Talk . . . the popular "Air Mail" column . . . 16 Western crosswords . . . and much more **— all for only $2.99!**

Use coupon to take advantage of this special offer **today!**

FILL OUT AND MAIL THIS COUPON TODAY

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Yes, enter my RANCH ROMANCES subscription for the next 32 weeks (16 issues) at only $2.99 . . . a money-saving rate that brings me the equivalent of 4 issues as a gift. My $2.99 is enclosed. **3-1**

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone____ State_____

(Add 50¢ for Canadian postage: $1.00 for foreign)

TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

CALLING off the hunt for a stolen car, an embarrassed Sacramento, Calif., used car dealer informed police that the auto had been "lost" only in paper work.

PEOPLE are often frightened by seeing wild animals running around loose, but in a San Antonio, Tex., zoo the process was reversed. A mountain lion, let out of its cage by mistake, was so terrified it jumped into a duck pond and had to be fished out with a net.

AFTER catching a bank robber, and ripping open a doll in which the thief had concealed his loot, a Plattsmouth, Neb., sheriff showed his kind heart by buying a new doll for the thief's small daughter to replace the one he had destroyed.

FRUSTRATED in their attempts to open a safe in a florist's shop in Detroit, Mich., the burglars decided at least to make off with some flowers. To their delight—and the owner's chagrin—they accidentally discovered that the owner's favorite hiding place for his cash was the flower refrigerator.

"WANT to buy a watch at a bargain because it's 'hot?' " asked the peddler while making a round of Oklahoma City, Okla., bars. His pitch was so successful that he had disposed of a fair number of watches —at $15 apiece—before police caught up with him and he was forced to admit that the watches had cost him $5, and the "hot" angle was just a device to make the merchandise more enticing to buyers.

LABOR and management are very lovey-dovey in a Eureka, Calif., restaurant. Management picketed the place with signs proclaiming that it had signed an agreement granting its employees a higher wage increase than the union demanded. The union rushed out pickets to picket the management pickets with signs saying: "Fair to organized labor."

POLICE surrounded a grocery store when an employee reported having spotted a masked man coming in. Caught, the man told police he was wearing a handkerchief over his face because he had all his teeth removed. He had just come in to buy some fruit juice.

NEITHER rain nor snow can bother the Post Office Department, but a Kamiah, Ida., landlord is a real problem. He wants the post office to vacate his store because he finds he can get a higher rent from a dry-goods concern.

ARRESTED for giving a stranger money to bet for him on a horse, a Chicago, Ill., man learned that the "bookie" was actually a detective. He was consoled by the fact that his horse couldn't have won anyway—it dropped dead during the race.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

THE LONELY MAN

A "badman" father fighting the son he deserted long ago provides the unusual plot for Paramount's suspenseful new Western

TO DISPROVE the law about the survival of the fittest, consider Jack Palance. He has made fifteen pictures during his Hollywood career, and he has survived the final fade-out in only three of them. But there's no question about his fitness as an actor. In each of his movies he played a more important part than in the one before. In *The Lonely Man*, soon to be released by Paramount, he is the star in the title role.

The part is especially well suited to Jack's talents. He is a man who returns to the scene of his first crime, when he killed a sheriff for preventing his parched cattle from reaching a waterhole. In his escape he deserted his wife and son, and when at last he comes home again he finds his wife dead and his son an implacable enemy.

In the years between he worked with a band of outlaws. Now, when he tries to reform, the members of the gang all hate him, and respectable people will have nothing to do with him.

Paramount has cast two of its most promising newcomers in support of Jack in *The Lonely Man*—Anthony Perkins as the son, and Elaine Aiken as the girl they both love.

Since I've devoted a whole page to Tony in this issue, you can find out there why people in Hollywood are betting that he's a star of the future.

As for Elaine, she's so new that only the people involved in making this picture can make any bets. She arrived in Hollywood just a few days before *The Lonely Man* went into production. She'd come west for a vacation and had run into an old friend, Rod Steiger, while sightseeing at Schwab's Drug Store. She and Rod were both students at the famous Actor's Studio in New York. Rod brought her to Paramount, and soon afterward she found herself breathlessly packing to go on location at Lone Pine, California.

"As soon as I got there and looked around," Elaine told me, "I discovered that the picture had been mistitled. It should have been called "The Lonely Woman." In the whole

troup there were one hundred twenty-one men and me. Just me."

Just about all of the principal players had at least one minor problem to overcome. For Elaine, it was learning to ride Western style, after years of posting sedately around New York's Central Park on Sunday mornings.

For Anthony, it was a problem he has faced before and will again. He's a natural southpaw and, since pulling a gun or doing almost anything else left-handed invariably distracts an audience, he's having to learn to switch.

Jack's problem is also one he has coped with before. It's his nose, which was permanently battered during his early career as a prizefighter. A make-up job, applied fresh every morning, straightens it out, but Jack is constantly worried that today's nose won't match yesterday's.

Neville Brand, the arch-villain of the movie, needed some help in becoming a cardsharp. One scene called for him to draw the ace of spades, and he puzzled about how he was going to manage it. But the prop department solved that one neatly, by giving him a deck in which every card was an ace of spades.

Another villain, Robert Middleton, had a tobacco-chewing problem. All through the movie he is seen with a plug in his cheek. Bob first tried molasses candy, but it tasted too good, melted too fast and got swallowed too soon. His mouth would be empty just when the camera was on him. He thought perhaps real chewing tobacco was the answer, but when he swallowed some of that, he changed his mind. Finally he settled on licorice, which he found plenty tough to chew on and not so tasty he couldn't bear to spit it out.

The only major problem for the company was the staging of a wild horse hunt. After much thought and consultation it was decided to use a huge canvas corral, rigged on poles, just what real horse hunters used to trap mustangs in Wyoming. If Hollywood can't think of a way to improve on their method, it just goes to show that the cowboys knew what they were doing.

Jack Palance visits Anthony Perkins, during a lull in the conflict

Anthony Perkins

The Big Gamble

ANTHONY PERKINS is a young man with fifteen million dollars invested in his future and triple-decker sandwich named after him. Both of these are signs that Paramount considers him a sure bet for stardom.

Hollywood veterans are saying that no other young actor has ever had so much staked on him before the public has had a chance to get a good look at him. His first movie, *The Actress,* with Jean Simmons, created no particular stir, and yet while he was making his second, *The Friendly Persuasion,* for Allied Artists, Paramount signed him to a seven-year contract. But a lot of things had happened to Tony between the two movies.

He is a little startled at the terrific hullaballoo being made over him now, but he never expected to be anything but an actor. His father was Osgood Perkins, a star of the thirties, and Tony has planned to follow in his dad's footsteps ever since he can remember.

When he was fourteen, he got his first summer theater job in Vermont. However, it was not his father's name which got him the chance. His mother's willingness to keep books, work in the box-office, and be generally useful around any theater was responsible for the hiring of her son.

It wasn't long, however, before Tony's own talents were enough to get him work. Besides playing in summer stock, he went into the road companies of two Broadway shows, and then to Hollywood to make *The Actress.*

Until then Tony had been confining his acting to the summertime. But he took what he called a leave of absence from his college, Rollins, to make the movie. He never went back, but he did make another stab at getting his degree by enrolling at Columbia.

However, the attraction of the TV studios and the theater was too strong to resist. Tony deserted his studies cheerfully when he got a chance to play in the stage version of *Tea and Sympathy.* When that job was over, Tony was offered parts in several TV shows.

Then he went back to Hollywood, and suddenly found himself the hottest property since Valentino, or at least since James Dean.

Tony told me that he's getting a little tired of always being spoken of as "another" or "a young—"

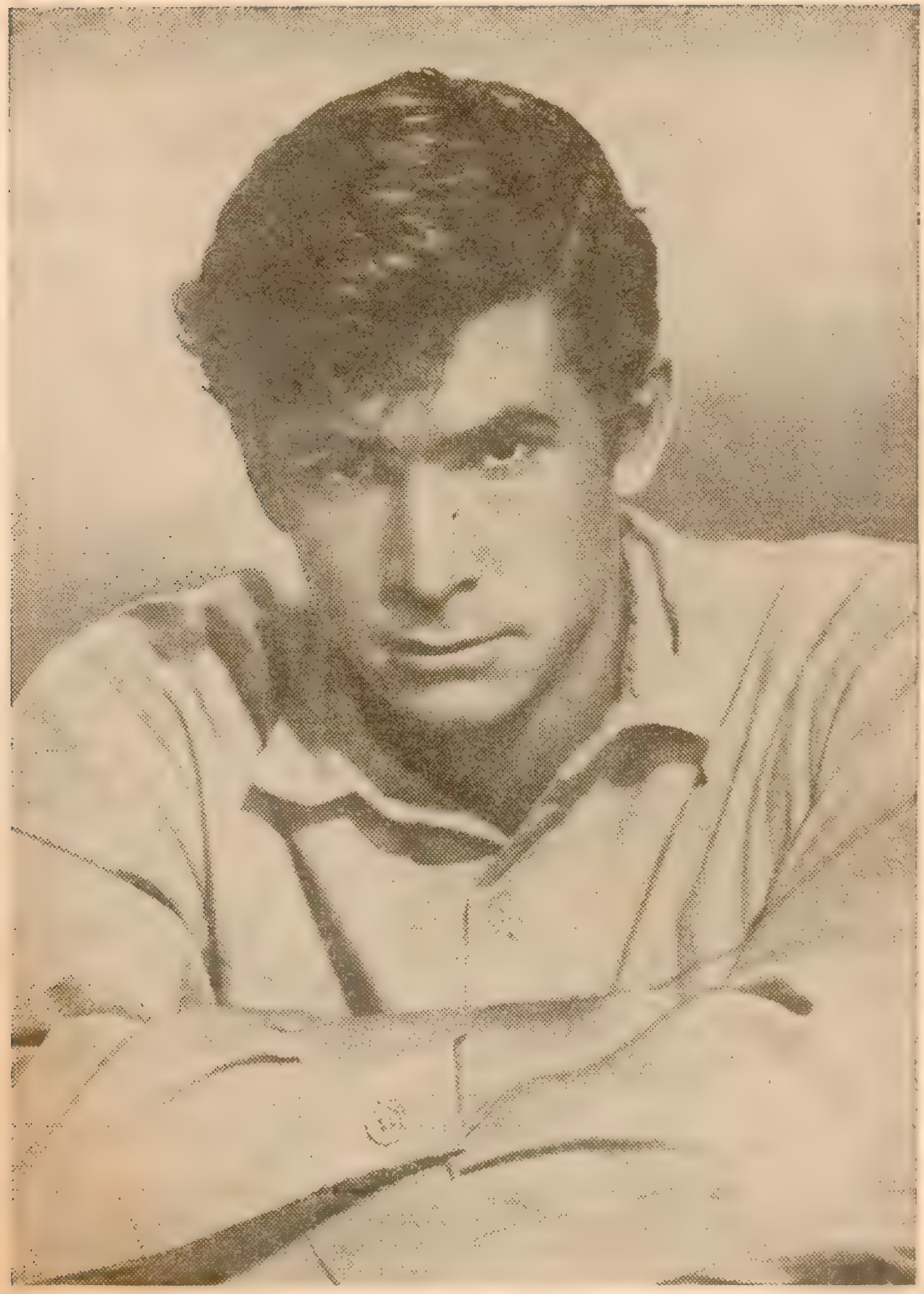
"The phrase goes, '*another* James Dean,' or '*a young* Gregory Peck,'" he said. "Just about the only star I haven't been compared to in that way is Lassie."

He'd much rather not be compared with anyone, and he realizes that the only way to accomplish that will be to make his own individual impression on the movie fans.

He'll have plenty of opportunity to do it, because that fifteen million dollars I told you had been invested in him represents seven movies, with a wide variety of parts for Tony, ranging from broad farce to deep tragedy.

Once you see Tony and talk to him, you realize that he's not "another" anyone. He's well able to win himself an army of fans just by being himself. He is surprised at all the attention, but he remains calm—on the surface, at least. When he saw his picture on the cover of a leading magazine, he said quietly, "Well, I guess it's good publicity."

I don't mean he's not delighted that his fan mail is increasing, or that triple-decker sandwiches get named for him. He grins with pleasure when people recognize him on the street, and he was seen glancing proudly at his name up in lights. "Being a movie actor is hard work," he said. "But it has to be some fun, too, or it wouldn't be worth all the trouble."



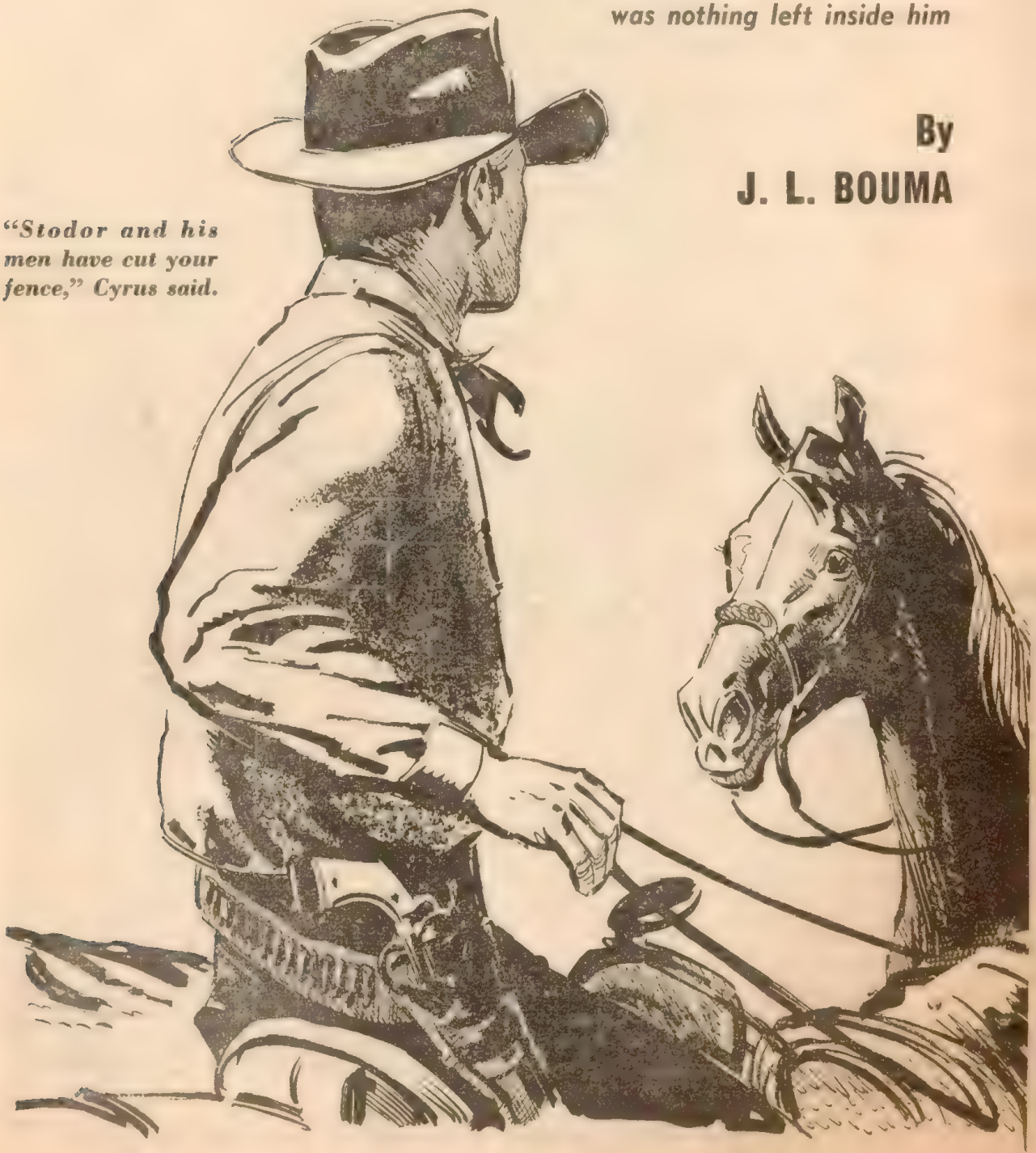
Paramount

Tony's startled but delighted at the sudden excitement about him

The Loner

EACH TIME he had killed a man, Cyrus has died a little . . . and now he was forced to fight, there was nothing left inside him

By
J. L. BOUMA

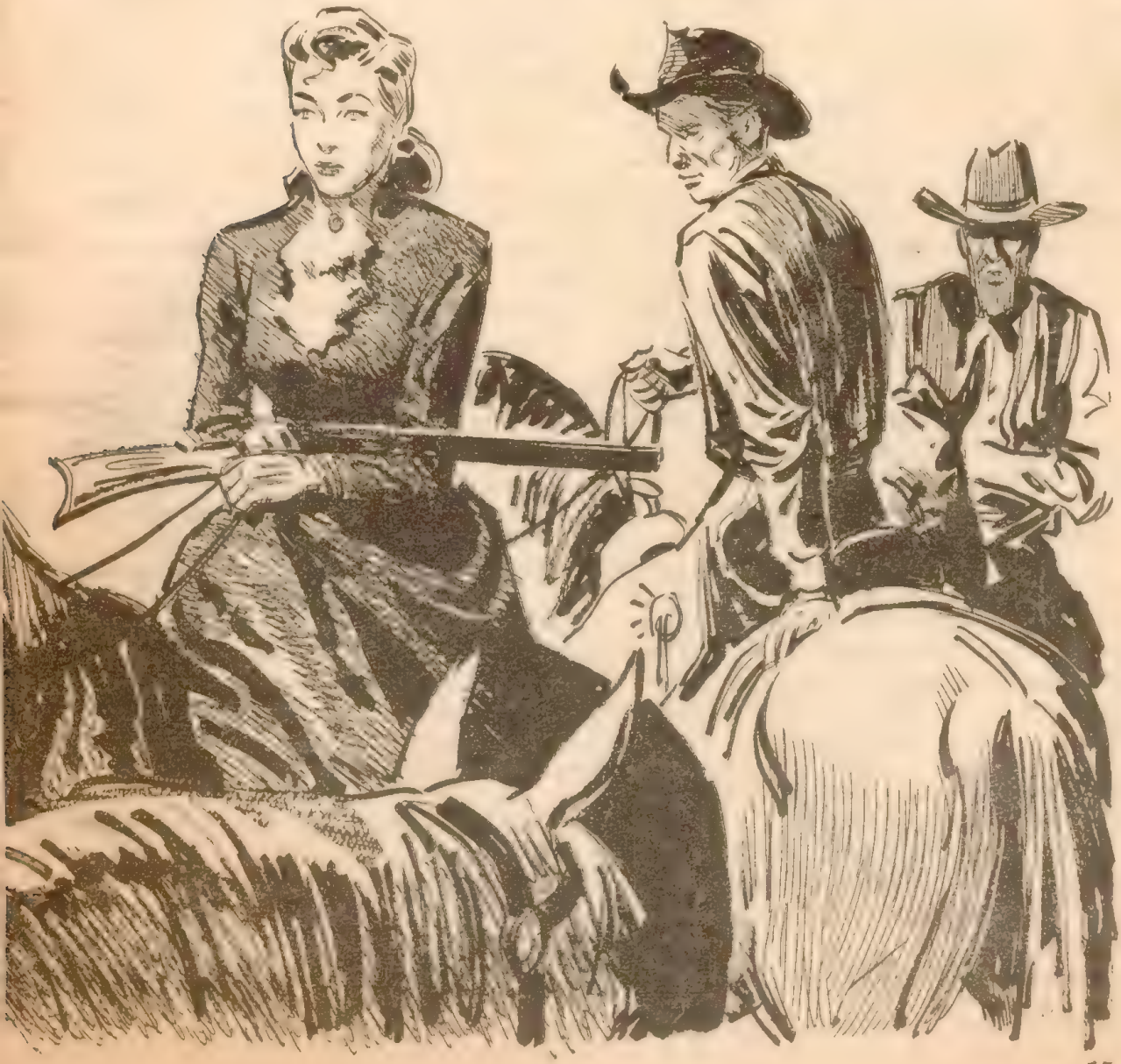


"Stodor and his men have cut your fence," Cyrus said.

IT WAS midmorning when Cyrus Croft saw the frame-and-adobe buildings of Randado in the distance. Behind him were a thousand miles of wandering trails and loneliness; before him the town where men had fought and died; and the scene of his personal tragedy. He was astride a tall steeldust, a lean brown man who went unarmed, and who rode with a music box strapped behind his saddle.

He knew there might still be men in Randado who would kill him on sight, but this possibility did not bother him. Such doubts as he had stemmed from the thought that in a short time he would look into the face of his small son after an absence of two years, and he was not sure this was the right thing for a man who did not mean to stay to do. It was a selfish thing at best, this desire to hold his own flesh and blood, and it might do the boy more harm than good.

Yet he rode on through the morning, the invisible threads of the past stronger than his doubts. He had been alone a great deal, completely alone,



for that was the way he had wanted it. Now, however, he needed the assurance of his son's voice, and his presence. Afterward he would be able to leave without regret, he told himself.

He stopped and smoked a cigarette, gazing north across a rolling meadow where wild oats grew as high as his horse's belly. A line of rocky hills held his attention. That was where it had happened, he thought. He had been leading the posse, and Hilderman's Barb riders had met them there. Hilderman had lost his two sons in those rocks, and Cyrus himself had suffered near-fatal wounds. And in the end the three-day battle had solved nothing.

Cyrus turned from the road and tied his horse at the picket fence of Cemetery Hill. He hesitated briefly, then unstrapped the music box from the rest of his belongings. Hat in hand, the box under his arm, he walked between the graves and stopped at a headboard located near the top of the hill. The inscription read:

BARBARA CROFT
Beloved Wife of Cyrus Croft
Born 1857 Died 1881
She has gone to join the Angels

Cyrus put the music box down and sat with his hands between his knees. Somewhere a bird chirped twice and then ceased. The smells of grass and sage came on the breeze, and the air was yellow with sunlight. Silence hovered like a halo over the little hill.

Cyrus had known many women, but never another one like Barbara, with her spirit of gaiety and her love for music. He turned the brass key that protruded from the music box, then lifted the lid. The tinkling notes sweetened the air. Cyrus lowered his head and listened closely. He evoked the image of a laughing face, and smiled. Perhaps, somewhere in Heaven, she was listening and enjoying the tune, he thought.

He was so absorbed in his reverie that he was not aware of the man's approach until a voice said harshly, "Shut that heathenish thing off!"

Cyrus looked up. He saw a stocky man with grizzled hair and a gray mustache, and recognized him at once as John Breton, Barb's foreman. He said mildly, "I wouldn't call such a sprightly tune heathenish, Breton," but lowered the lid nevertheless.

The music ceased. Looking past Breton, Cyrus saw the woman—a tall, shapely woman, hatless, in a gray gown—standing at the side of a large headstone, her arms filled with wild flowers. He realized with a faint shock that is was Natalie Hilderman, and he rose.

Breton was staring at him with outraged eyes. "You," he said hoarsely. "You have a nerve coming back to this town."

Cyrus indicated the grave. "I came to visit my wife," he said, and looked toward the sprawling town. "And my son."

Breton's mouth showed contempt. "You timed it right, didn't you?"

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that we buried Mr. Hilderman last week, and that your presence here at this time is no coincidence."

"I didn't know Hilderman had died," Cyrus said quietly, "and I still don't know what you're talking about."

"Duke Durrant sent for you," Breton said angrily. "He knew Mr. Hilderman was dying, so he sent for you like he did the others."

"No one sent for me."

"You lie!"

Cyrus said softly, "Considering the situation, I'll let that pass. But don't call me a liar again."

"John!" the woman called.

Breton took a ragged breath. Murderous hatred flared in his gray eyes. "Mr. Hilderman is dead," he said, "but that doesn't mean Barb's done for, and don't you forget it."

He turned away then and joined the woman. She placed the flowers on her father's grave, then followed Breton to the buggy parked by the fence. As they drove toward town, Cyrus sank down again. So Hilderman was dead—Hilderman, who had, indirectly, been responsible for Barbara's death.

It had happened at a time when the great valley reeked of trouble. They had not been settled on their small ranch long enough to perceive the hidden currents that motivated the violence that had taken place. They knew the sheriff had been killed and that Barb ranch was on the warpath. Hilderman's vast herds had been raided once too often, and so he had reverted to gun law.

His crew had struck twice at small ranches west of Cyrus's place. One ranch belonged to saloonman Duke Durrant, the other to a man named Staats. Both places had been burned to the ground. This much they knew; this much they had been aware of.

Barbara had said that they might be next, and she'd insisted on staying in town until the trouble was over. Cyrus, who'd had no idea that they had bought into the middle of a range war, was baffled and angry. Why should they suffer because of something that had started before their arrival in the valley?

BUT he had his wife and small son to consider, and so they came to town. In the crowded lobby of the hotel they listened to rumors—vague rumors, for men were wary of taking sides. It was whispered that Hilderman considered Duke Durrant responsible for the rustling, and that most of the smaller outfits were in with Durrant. Hilderman's cattle dominated the greater part of the valley, but the rustlers had been stealing him blind. And it was whispered that the Barb owner could be right about Durrant.

Others claimed uneasily that Hilderman was at fault. He had pioneered this country, his actions ruthless, and he had hated law and order. It was common knowledge that he had hanged more than one rustler without bothering about a trial. And who was to say that these men had been guilty as charged?

Then another rumor swept through the lobby. Hilderman and his crew had arrived in town. There were close to thirty of them. They were at the Desert Inn, getting ready to raid Duke Durrant's saloon. Durrant had been warned, and he had placed men with rifles on the roof of his establishment. Already the street was empty of life. Barbara spoke of taking Billy to Boone Hunter's store. She and Hunter's daughter, Myra, were old friends, and she thought they might be safer there than at the hotel.

But it had been too late to make the move. Barb riders had galloped into view, their fire directed at the saloon on the corner. The fusillade from the roof of the saloon knocked two horsemen out of their saddles; the rest of the Barb riders had galloped on past the hotel.

It had been impossible to learn who had fired the shot that killed Barbara. It might have been a ricochet. The bullet had come through a small colored pane of glass in the heavy door, and Barbara had fallen without a sound, shot through the head and killed instantly. Little Billy had started to scream.

Word of what had happened spread quickly, and the Barb men left town. Duke Durrant and a committee of townsmen had called on Cyrus immediately. Durrant had started out respectfully, and he and the others had spoken of law and order.

"We understand that you've had experience as a marshal in Texas, and we want you to represent the law here, Mr. Croft. We understand that it's an unusual situation, but the majority of the people will be behind you."

Cyrus had only met two or three of the city fathers casually, and he was bitter and confused. "I just don't know."

"This is an emergency," Durrant said. "When things reach the stage where a man like Hilderman will take the law into his own hands, he must be stopped and made to face justice. An election, at this time, is out of the question, but we of the town council feel we have the right to appoint you. Will you accept?"

Torn by grief and rage, Cyrus had accepted. Later, he knew he had done so not out of a need for revenge, but to supplant his grief with action. He would have joined a posse regardless of who led it.

In the battle that followed, six men had died on Boulder Ridge, including Hilderman's two sons. Cyrus had been wounded on the second day, and another three days passed before he learned that troops had arrived from Fort Stanton and had put a stop to the useless slaughter—slaughter that had not solved a thing, and had only added to the bitterness of those involved.

Cyrus had learned this in a room above Duke Durrant's saloon, where they had brought him. Cyrus had not cared one way or the other; all he had felt was a great apathy that had left him totally indifferent to all that happened.

Durrant's girls had nursed him. And one day Myra Hunter had called, obviously dis-

gusted with his surroundings. She was a pale, pretty girl with a voluptuous figure, but she had little talent for laughter. An air of brittle restlessness marked her as she spoke of Billy.

Finally she said, "I wish you'd move out of here, Cyrus. You're well enough now to be transferred to a room at the hotel."

"This is as good a place as any," Cyrus said.

He had been thinking indifferently that she had said nothing about moving him to her fathers' big house. He supposed that Hunter had been against such a move, for fear Hilderman would learn about it and take his trade somewhere else. It did not matter in the least to Cyrus.

Myra had not stayed long, and she had never returned; afterward she had communicated with him through one of her father's store clerks. Cyrus had not seen her again until the day he left.

That was three weeks later, when he felt well enough to travel. He had sold his ranch to Durrant, aware of an urgent need to escape the past. So he had talked to Myra, and she had agreed to keep Billy, saying the boy would be company for her. And Cyrus had left town with a sense of relief, dampened by an aching loneliness that had never quite left him.

He had drifted haphazardly, and now he was back. He took a gusty breath, thinking that a man had no business raking over ashes of the past. He rose then, picked up his hat and the music box, and walked down the hill to his horse.

THE town had not changed in the two years Cyrus had been away. There were the same adobe buildings of one or two stories, with deep verandas and upper galleries. There were Mexicans, and a few Indians, along the street; cowpunchers lounged in the shade of awnings and followed

his passage with their eyes. He pulled his horse to a walk, and the animal's hoofs made soft little plops in the street's dust.

He passed the Desert Inn and saw men lined against the bar. A hundred feet farther, across the street at the intersection, was Duke Durrant's big clapboard saloon and dancehall. Cyrus frowned, thinking that, according to what Breton had implied, Barb and the Durrant faction were still at odds. Well, it had nothing to do with him, he thought.

He left his horse at a livery stable and then walked over to Boone Hunter's emporium, carrying his gear. It was a barn-like structure with a cluttered interior, reputed to be one of the biggest stores west of Santa Fe. Three or four clerks were kept busy waiting on customers. Cyrus looked for Myra, then made his way back to the small office, where he found her father working at his rolltop desk.

Hunter, a gaunt, turkey-necked man in a striped shirt and stiff white collar, looked up as Cyrus entered. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "When did you get in?"

"Just now." Cyrus shook the limp hand that Hunter offered him. "How's everything, Boone?"

"Pretty fair," Hunter answered in that cautious way of his. "Why didn't you let us know in your last letter that you were heading this way?"

"I didn't know I was coming. How's Billy?"

"Fine, he's growing like a weed. Myra's taken quite a fancy to the boy."

"Are they at home?"

Hunter shook his head. "They went visiting. They'll be home this afternoon, I reckon." He paused, and a little smile narrowed his gaze. "Did you know that Hilderman died recently?"

"Yes."

Hunter toyed with a pencil. "Too bad," he mused. "Well, that's the way it goes. A man doesn't live forever, and after he dies things are apt to change." He grinned slyly at Cyrus.

"How do you mean that?"

Hunter pursed his lips. "Don't know as I'd care to say. A man in my position has to watch his step, Cyrus; he can't favor one and not the other—not when there's apt to be trouble, anyhow."

"Meaning Durrant?" Cyrus asked.

Hunter shrugged. "He's smart and he's rich. Right now he's my biggest customer. Are you just riding through, or are you fixing to stay a while?"

"For a few days, anyway," Cyrus said. Then he added, "Well, I'd better get a room."

"We'll be expecting you for supper," Hunter said, and went on with his work.

Cyrus went out thinking that the storekeeper was still his old cautious self. He would always straddle the fence and never step on anyone's toes. Maybe he had the right idea at that.

As he mounted the hotel steps, Cyrus noticed with a kind of shock that the small broken pane of glass through which Barbara had been shot had not been replaced. He signed the register and went upstairs to his room, stripped out of his range clothes, and washed and shaved. He donned clean underwear, then took a flannel shirt and a brown suit from his belongings. He dressed and went downstairs. He was drifting along the street when Duke Durrant hailed him from the doorway of his saloon.

Durrant said, "I saw you ride by a while ago. Cyrus, it's good to see you again."

They shook hands. Durrant was a tall blond man in a box coat and a brocaded vest. A pearl stickpin decorated his cravat, and a diamond sparked on his finger. There was a studied air of assurance about him, as though he had set a goal in life and meant to attain it. It struck Cyrus that, though they had shared a short and violent experience, he scarcely knew the man.

Durrant was smiling. "How about a drink to celebrate?"

Cyrus said dryly, "There's no reason to celebrate, but I'll take the drink just the same."

Durrant chuckled and held the door open. "Well, how does the place look?" he asked cheerfully.

"All right," Cyrus said.

It was bigger and fancier than the saloons a man was likely to find in the average cow town. There was an ornate mirror behind the long bar, tables and chairs to one side, a small dance floor and the gambling layout in back. A swamper was busy emptying spittoons in a slop bucket; another was wiping a table top with a wet cloth. A little man with a whiskered face sat by the window, drinking coffee from a blue mug. The bartender brought a bottle and glasses.

Durrant poured, touched Cyrus's glass with his and said, "How," and they drank. Then the saloonman leaned an elbow on the bar and sighed. "Where've you been, Cyrus?"

"Fiddlefooting around the country."

"That's a waste of good time," Durrant said, watching the little man get up from his seat by the window and leave.

"Maybe," Cyrus said. "How's the cattle business?"

"Fine," Durrant said heartily. "I bought Staats out, too. What with my original place, I've got quite a spread now." He looked at Cyrus. "Do you want a job?"

CYRUS shook his head, smiling. He saw a woman come down the stairs that led to Durrant's living quarters. She approached them with a suggestive sway of her hips, a dark-skinned woman with brilliant black eyes that held an expression of devotion, yearning even, as she spoke to Durrant in a low voice.

He half turned to listen, then said curtly, "Kate, don't bother me about that now." She forced a too-bright smile, her eyes wounded, then sat at a table and watched them.

Durrant said, "Did you hear that the old bull is dead?"

"Yes."

The blond man poured a second round, his hand trembling slightly, his face alight with some inner excitement. "There are going to be a lot of changes around here during the next couple of weeks, so you'd better come in with me, Cyrus. I've seen you work and I like the positive way you handle yourself. I can use you, and I don't mean to punch cattle, either."

A shout lifted in the street. When Cyrus looked through the window he saw two or three men running.

Durrant muttered, "What's this?"

In that moment they heard the report of a single shot. For a second they stared blankly at each other; then they hurried out. The scattered crowd in front of the hotel did not quite screen the figure sprawled below the steps. As Cyrus ran forward he saw it was John Breton. A thin little man with a whiskered face stood half a dozen feet away, a smoking gun in his hand. Cyrus looked at the man sharply. There was no doubt about it: he was the one who had left Durrant's saloon a few minutes ago.

The lobby door opened. Natalie Hilderman uttered a little cry, ran down the steps, and knelt at Breton's side, her full skirts trailing across the dusty boardwalk. She gave Breton her attention for a moment, then looked up and said briskly, "He's still alive. Will somebody please fetch Dr. George?" She glanced briefly at the little gunman, her eyes hard with contempt.

The gunman took a step back and growled, "He drew on me."

The woman ignored him. "Will someone please fetch the doctor?" she repeated.

Since no one moved, Cyrus stepped up to a towheaded youngster, slipped a silver dollar into his hand, and said softly, "Fetch him, son." The boy darted away. Natalie Hilderman regarded Cyrus coldly.

"Thank you," she said.

"We'd better get him inside," Cyrus said.

The gunman growled, "Leave him be."

Cyrus looked at him. The man's eyes were hooded and dangerous. He pointed his gun at Cyrus. "Leave him be," he repeated. "This is not your business."

Cyrus said, "Shoot and be damned." He turned his back deliberately, stooped, and picked Breton up in his arms.

The gunman cursed, but holstered his weapon. "Next time we meet you'd better be packing a gun!" he shouted, as he walked away.

The woman led the way into the hotel and upstairs. She unlocked a door and held it open, and Cyrus put Breton on the bed. Then she closed the door and came around to the opposite side of the bed.

"Did you see it happen?" she asked coldly.

"No."

"And of course it wouldn't have made any difference," she said. "I suppose that even if you wore a gun you'd be afraid to use it." Cyrus said nothing. He could understand the bitterness that had prompted her words. Last week she had lost her father; now her foreman had been shot.

Cyrus could not, nor did he want to, explain why he never went armed. During his younger years, when he had worn a marshal's badge, he had killed; it had been necessary at times. Then, when he had married Barbara, he had turned his back on that life, and had not shot again in anger until the fight at Boulder Ridge.

The senseless slaughter there had dismayed him, and he had made up his mind never to wear a gun again, knowing that an angry man and a gun made a bad combination, while a gunless man, angry though he might be, would stop to consider the situation before going after a weapon.

He helped the woman remove Breton's vest and shirt. The old man was unconscious. Someone entered the room, and Cyrus saw a huge, bulky man with thick sideburns, and with a star pinned to his shirt pocket. His name was Yager. At one time he had worked in Durrant's saloon as a bouncer, and Cyrus remembered that he had been a member of the posse that had fought Barb. Now he was county sheriff.

Yager gave Cyrus a short nod, his face hard, his eyes curtained. "How is he?"

"Bad," said Cyrus.

"I didn't see it happen myself, but folks are saying he bumped into Sundance and they had words. Then Breton went for his gun."

"Sundance?" said Cyrus.

"He worked for us," the woman said. "He lasted a month. John fired him because he showed up drunk at my father's funeral. That's probably why they had words." She looked at Yager. "Or was there more to it than that?" she asked contemptuously.

"I've told you all I know," Yager said, and turned to the door. "I'll go tell the doctor to snap it up."

The woman had been bending over Breton. Now she straightened and said in a flat voice, "Don't bother; because the doctor can't help him now. John's dead."

IN THE living room of Hunter's house, Cyrus held his small son between his knees, feeling the boy's thin but firm arms. Billy squirmed and laughed, and Cyrus felt a curious ache in his chest as he looked at a miniature of his own face. He smiled at Myra, who was watching them, her cheeks flushed.

"You've done wonders with him, Myra."

"We get along."

"Are you going to stay?" the boy piped.

Cyrus felt a momentary guilt. He saw that Myra was watching him anxiously. "We'll see," he said.

"Can we got to the ranch tomorrow? Can we go where we used to live?"

"Do you remember where we used to live?"

"Not real good," the boy said, "but I know there was a fence by the creek."

Cyrus chuckled. "I put that up so you wouldn't fall in the water."

"Can we go, Daddy? Can we?"

"I don't see why not. Durrant owns the place now, but I don't think he'd mind if we went out there."

"No one stays there now," Myra said. "Mr. Durrant just uses the buildings and the corrals at branding time."

The boy said eagerly, "Can we ride your horse?"

Cyrus laughed. He had expected a certain awkwardness between them, but they were getting along fine. "I think we'd better hire a buggy. It's a little too far for you to sit on my horse's neck all the way."

"Oh, I wouldn't sit on his neck!" the boy cried. And then he added, "Can I play the music box again, Daddy?"

Myra rose. "You'd better get cleaned up for supper. Father will be home any minute."

"All right," the boy said happily, and left the room.

Myra went to the kitchen, and Cyrus followed. "I didn't realize how much I've missed him," he said.

She turned and looked at him, her cheeks oddly flushed, and her full breasts lifted on a shaky breath. She was rather pretty, and her figure was desirable, but at the same time she had an inside-of-herself quality, as though she were fearful of showing her feelings.

Now, however, a little yearning crept into her face, and she said softly, "You'll stay, Cyrus?"

"I hadn't meant to," he answered truthfully.

"Please stay. You belong here."

She touched the lapel of his coat, her fingers unsteady, and what he saw in her eyes made him uncomfortable, it was that revealing. Good heavens, she was in love with him! He remembered that once Barbara had said as much.

"Do you know that Myra is in love with you?" she had teased.

Cyrus laughed. "Why, she could have her pick of the young bucks in the country."

"If she changed her ways, yes. I've told her so, too. But she's sort of bitter, and all wrapped up in a little world of her own. Do you know that one time she loved a man and he treated her rather badly? He was a drummer, a good-looking man. He used to stop at the store about once a month, and she was crazy about him. She always had him over for dinner, and she usually arranged a social for him.

"She spoke of marriage, and that her father was going to take him into the store as a partner. Then he was transferred to a territory around Taos, and she went there to see him. When she came back she never mentioned his name again." Barbara had paused.

"I suppose he broke her heart, and I shudder to think of what she'll do if the next man she really falls in love with rejects her too."

Now Cyrus heard Myra saying, "You could work for Dad. You two do get along, you know." She paused. "He's spoken of going into the cattle business on the side, so maybe you could manage the ranch for him." Myra watched him pleadingly.

Cyrus looked at her, and for the second time in his life considered marriage. "We'll see," he said, and Myra flushed.

Hunter came in a few minutes later, frowning. "That was a bad business this morning. I hear you almost got into it yourself." He shook his head gloomily. "It was a bad business."

"You can't leave a dying man lying in the street," Cyrus said, annoyed.

"It's not a good idea to take sides, either," Hunter said.

Cyrus looked at him. "Take sides in what?"

"Well, when an outfit like Barb goes downhill, it starts a man figuring," Hunter said, and glanced uneasily at his daughter.

Cyrus frowned. "What are you getting at?"

"I'm just saying that there's been trouble brewing since Hilderman first got sick. He had a big outfit, and all that grass and water. There was bound to be trouble."

Cyrus stared at the floor, thinking that Hunter was nibbling around the edges. But he was right about trouble brewing at a time like this. It was an old story in cattle country. Whenever a top dog passed on, another took his place. That always spelled trouble.

"I hear Durrant's been hiring lately," Cyrus said.

"Did he offer you a job?"

"How'd you guess?"

Hunter ran his fingers through his sparse hair. "I figured he might." He cleared his throat. "I'd thought of asking you myself."

"Dad!" Myra said and smiled. "You mean you're going to buy a ranch?"

"Let it out of the bag, didn't I?" Hunter said, grinning. "The fact is, I went into a deal with Durrant."

"Why, that's wonderful!" Myra said. "What kind of a deal?"

"We're buying up a herd in Texas. Twenty thousand dollars on the hoof." He looked at Myra. "You remember that fellow Burden that Durrant brought into see me last month? Well, he's handling the deal. He figures to deliver the herd next month."

"Where do you mean to get your grass?" Cyrus asked.

"I made a deal with Durrant to run my cut of the beef on his grass until we can work out something else," Hunter said vaguely.

Myra said happily, "What did I tell you, Cyrus? Now you can go to work for Dad."

Cyrus was still watching Hunter. "By something else you mean Barb grass, don't you?"

"I didn't say that," Hunter answered testily. "Anyhow, feeding that herd is Durrant's problem. But if you aim to stay, I'd as soon work out some kind of a deal with you."

CYRUS grunted. So Durrant meant to take over Barb. He'd intimated as much, with his talk of the changes that were going to take place in the valley. Cyrus's eyes hardened. Had Durrant planned Breton's death? Had that been his first step toward taking over Barb? Cyrus remembered that Sundance had been in the saloon prior to the shooting, but that didn't necessarily mean that he was Durrant's man. And yet—

Hunter's passion for money had made him Durrant's partner, and this was what Cyrus didn't like. For it Durrant was behind Breton's death, Boone Hunter was a part of the pattern. Unwittingly, unaware of what his partner was up to, he was still connected with the business indirectly. The thought was disconcerting.

"Well, you two can talk it over later on, and I'm sure you can come to an agreement," Myra said, and smiled. "Cyrus, do you want to help me set the table?"

Supper was not the pleasant meal Cyrus had hoped it would be. If Durrant had his mind set on taking over Barb, there was bound to be another range war. Cyrus did not mean to get involved by taking sides, even it it meant taking Billy away and starting a new life somewhere else.

After breakfast next morning, Cyrus rented a buggy and drove to Hunter's house. Billy

ran outside, clutching the music box, his face shining. Myra followed with a wicker basket. She said, "I can't get that music box away from him. He even kept it in bed with him last night. I put up a little lunch for you, cold chicken and sandwiches."

"Thanks, Myra."

Her smile was pensive. He thought of asking her to join them, but decided against it because he wanted to spend the day alone with his son. He said, "We'll be back for supper." Billy waved happily as they drove away.

They left town, and the sun was shining. The boy spoke eagerly; question after question tumbled from his lips. How did it feel to be killed dead like Mr. Breton? Why had that man shot him? How old did Billy have to be before he could have a horse? Where did the sun come from in the morning, and where did it go at night? Was Myra going to be his new Mommy now that his Daddy was back?

The last prompted Cyrus's own question. "Do you remember your mother, son?"

"I remember she used to sing," the boy said, "but I don't remember what she looked like hardly at all."

Cyrus understood. The boy had only been three years old when Barbara was killed, and the tragedy of her death had not touched him. Now all of his tomorrows beckoned, and each new day held its mysterious promise. But Billy needed a mother, and Myra liked him.

The team trotted briskly through the sunny morning. The country opened up to Cyrus. He gave himself to the day and to his son, feeling happy for the first time in months. Two hours later they came in sight of the ranch buildings. At first glance the place appeared deserted, but as they entered the barren yard Cyrus noted that there was a sorrel gelding in the corral.

"There's a horse!" Billy cried.

"Yes," Cyrus said. He had stopped the team and was looking around when the door of the house opened and a man with a rifle came out.

"What the hell are you doing here!" the man demanded shrilly.

Cyrus saw with a small shock that it was Sundance, and that he was half drunk. He gripped Billy's arm. "Stay put, son."

He turned the team slowly. Sundance shambled forward, weaving slightly, his red-rimmed eyes squinting in his bearded face. Knowing the man would recognize him any second, Cyrus continued to turn the team. He remembered the way Sundance had looked at him yesterday, and knew it was best to leave in a hurry. He didn't think the man would shoot with the boy here, but he couldn't be sure. Drunks were unpredictable at best.

"Hey, I asked what the hell you're doing here!" Sundance said in that same shrill tone.

"I came to the wrong place, friend," said Cyrus.

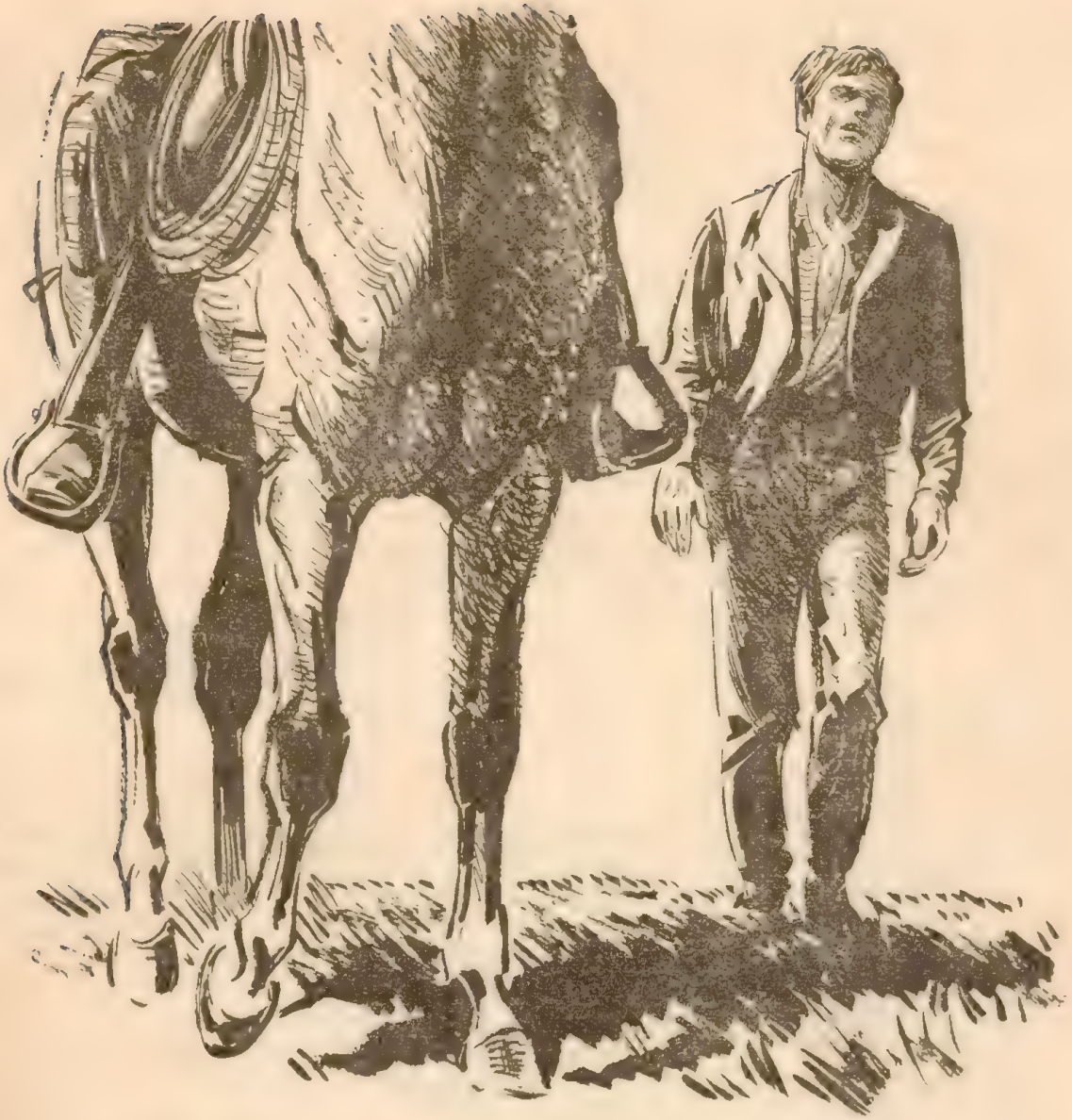
In that instant saw recognition dawn on the other's face. "I'll be damned!" He stumbled forward as Cyrus straightened the team and headed out of the yard. "I told you to pack a gun next time. Stop, damn you!"

He cursed, then fired as the team broke into a run. Cyrus pushed Billy to the floor. There came another shot. Billy screamed and Cyrus saw blood on the boy's arm. A killing rage possessed him, but he fought against it. Every instinct urged him to leap down and tackle Sundance with his bare hands, but Billy's presence stopped him.

As they turned on the road, Cyrus looked back and saw Sundance hurrying toward the corral. The man stopped suddenly, raised his rifle, lowered it again, then stood rubbing his face. The fact that he had hit the boy had just entered his drunken head, Cyrus thought, raging.

HE LOOKED at Billy, who was staring at his bleeding arm in a fascinated sort of way, his face pale with shock. The boy said, "Well, I guess I got shot all right." Then his face broke and puskered and he started to cry.

Cyrus said, "Don't, Billy." Rage clawed inside him, and his face was like rock. "There's no need to cry. Anyway, it isn't every day a boy as young as you gets shot." He drove a mile, saw that the road behind them was clear, and stopped the buggy. Then he examined Billy's arm. "Why, it's nothing but a scratch," he said, and tied a handkerchief around it. "I'll bet it doesn't even hurt."



Pain was like a vise as Cyrus staggered and then walked forward

"Daddy, you're shaking. Why are you shaking, Daddy? Why didn't you shoot that man back?"

"I don't have a gun," Cyrus said.

"Well, I guess I got shot all right," Billy said, and there was a little pride in his voice. "Little boys like me don't get shot every day, do they, Daddy?"

"That's right," Cyrus said. "Play your music box, son. You're all right. You're doing fine."

Myra came outside as they drove up in front of Hunter's house. "My, you two got back in a hurry," she began. Then color left her face as Cyrus carried Billy up to the porch, for the boy had fallen asleep. She stared at the blood-stained handkerchief "Cyrus, what happened?"

Cyrus carried Billy into his room and put him on the bed. The boy did not waken. Then he drew Myra to the front room and told her quickly what had happened.

"The bullet just broke the skin, that's all. You won't need to call the doctor."

"Are you sure it was the same man who killed John Breton?"

"Positive."

"But what do you suppose he was doing there?"

"Don't worry about it. And don't tell anyone what happened, Myra. I don't want it to get out just yet."

She stared at him. "But something has to be done about it. You'd better go and tell Sheriff Yager right away."

"I'll take care of it," Cyrus said, and left the house.

Myra followed, and took the music box and the lunch basket from the buggy. "Why did it have to happen when everything was so nice?" she said plaintively.

"Don't think about it," Cyrus said. He drove to the livery stable, where he said to the hostler, "Saddle my horse. I'll be back directly."

He strode on into town then, thinking it strange that his mind should be set on killing a man—and so suddenly, after two years of not touching a gun. Why was it that rage could change a man so?

When he came even with the sheriff's office, with its two-story adobe jail in back, he hesitated. After standing there for an undecided moment, he entered. Yager leaned back in his chair and clasped thick fingers behind his head.

He said, "I saw you and your boy leaving town this morning. Did you go for a little drive?"

"That's right."

"You didn't happen to go out to your old place, did you?" Yager spoke casually, too casually.

Cyrus said, "I might go out there later."

Yager rubbed his jaw. "Too bad about Breton. He should have known better than to tangle with Sundance."

"Do you have Sundance locked up?" Cyrus asked.

"Why should I have him locked up? Hell, man, he shot in self defense. Was there something you wanted to see me about, Cyrus?"

"No, I was just passing by." Cyrus turned to the door.

"You going out to your place this afternoon?" Yager asked.

"I didn't plan to. Why?"

"I just wondered," Yager said, and lifted a hand. "See you around."

Cyrus went out, glad now that he hadn't spoken of the shooting, for it was obvious that Yager was Durrant's man. It had been pretty obvious yesterday at the hotel, Cyrus thought. Natalie Hilderman had intimated that Breton might have been shot for another reason than the fact that he had fired Sundance, and Yager had turned his wooden stare on her instead of asking what she was getting at. He, as well as Durrant, must have known that Breton was going to die, Cyrus thought.

He walked on to the saloon, entered, and looked around. A poker game was in session and he noticed that Durrant was playing. The woman called Kate stood behind him rubbing his shoulder. When she leaned over and kissed his cheek, he made an important gesture that brought a wounded smile to her face.

Cyrus went out. He hadn't expected to find Sundance in the saloon, but he had wanted to make sure. The little gunman was no doubt worried, and it was possible that later on he would check with Durrant to learn where he stood. But it was also possible that his work here had ended with Breton's death, and he was on his way out of the country.

Cyrus found a gun shop and bought a rifle and a saddle boot, as well as a belt and holster and waist gun, and ammunition for both weapons. He picked up the steeldust and rode out of town. As he passed Cemetery Hill, he saw Natalie Hilderman and five or six cowpunchers and a preacher standing bareheaded around an open grave. Cyrus doffed his own hat, put it back on, then loped away from town.

THE corral was empty, and Cyrus wasn't surprised. Sundance had skipped, and Cyrus looked for sign. But there were numerous horse tracks in the yard and along the lane, and it was impossible to tell which ones had been made by the sorrel gelding.

Cyrus considered the situation. Sundance had either crossed the hills to town, or he was making tracks out of the valley. There was, however, one other possibility: Sundance might have gone on to Durrant's ranch. Cyrus decided to go there and find out.

When he came in sight of the ranch, he studied the place carefully. There were an adobe bunkhouse and four or five sheds, two large corrals, and a cook shack with smoke coming from the chimney. In back was a shallow creek that flowed from the mouth of a narrow canyon. Cattle dotted the grassy reaches beyond. Cyrus crossed into the yard.

"Do you want something?" a gruff voice said from the cook shack.

The man moved forward with a limp. He had a red, bloated face and suspicious eyes, and wore a dirty canvas apron around his vast waist. He looked vaguely familiar to Cyrus.

The man grinned suddenly. "How goes it, Croft? One of the boys said you were back. Remember me? I'm Slim Meany." He slapped his leg. "Boulder Ridge. A Barb rider did it to me, the dirty son! Cou got hit that same day. Remember me now?"

Cyrus nodded. "You've put on a little weight, Slim."

"They crippled me. I can't sit a saddle, but Duke kept me on. I help the cook, and putter around doing this and that. I'm getting fatter'n a hog."

"Where is everybody?"

Meany winked slyly. "The boys are out doing a little job of work, and the cook went to town for supplies." He grinned. "I heard you were with Breton when he croaked yesterday."

"That's right." Cyrus paused. "What was the fellow's name that shot him? What was it they called him, Sundown?"

"Sundance. They tell me he's a fast man with a gun."

"Do you know him?"

"Naw. I've seen him a time or two, though."

So Sundance hadn't stopped by here, Cyrus thought. He said, "You say the boys are out working?"

Meany winked again. "Taking care of a little job where Barb fenced us off from Spruce Park." He paused, then added acidly, "Damned if I wouldn't like to be with 'em! It was a Barb man that crippled me, and I've never forgotten!" He spat. "I hate the guts of every one of those sidewinders."

It was sad, the venom that lived and breeded in some men, Cyrus thought. Meany didn't know who had fired the shot that had crippled him, only that it had been a Barb rider, and so his hatred was for Barb and anyone connected with that outfit.

"You ought to hit Duke up for a job," Meany said. "Or ask Stodor; he'll put you on. He's up there at the park with the boys. Go ask him, and you'll have your chance to get back at Barb. You don't want to miss any of the fun."

"What fun?"

"Are you going out there?"

"I guess not."

"Then I'd better keep quiet about it before I get myself in bad," Meany said. "Do you want some coffee?"

"No, thanks just the same. I've been riding. I have to get back to town."

"Take care," Meany said, and shambled back to the cook shack as Cyrus rode out of the yard.

As he picked up the valley road, Cyrus looked north in the direction of Spruce Park, and thought over what Meany had said. The park had always been regarded as Barb country, a place of red and white spruce and sprawling meadows. Meany had said to get in on the fun, whatever that meant. And then Cyrus thought, what do I care?

Yet he stopped the steeldust and sat a moment, irresolute, thinking that the Barb ranch road followed the fence line along the edge of the park. Stodor, Durrant's ramrod, would know that Barb was in town to bury Breton, and it followed that he was taking advantage of their absence to pull some kind of a raw deal. Again Cyrus thought, what do I care?

He told himself he didn't care. But he wanted to know just the same; he wanted proof of what Durrant's men were up to so he could warn Boone Hunter where his partnership with Durrant was leading him. Having made his decision, Cyrus spurred the steeldust in the direction of the park.

Spruce Park was a great kidney-shaped bowl, eight miles long and from three to five miles wide. The Barb ranch buildings were located at its extreme tip. A rough chain of rocky hills made a natural boundary to the north; spruce-covered slopes bordered the rich meadows southward. A wide pass gave

entrance to the west, and it was here that Hilderman had stretched his barbed wire fence.

Sitting on his heels in the brush of a ridge top, a thin growth of spruce screening him from below, Cyrus saw instantly that part of the fence had been torn down. He saw a bunch of cattle grazing in a small meadow, and a dozen or more saddled horses tied back in the trees. Their riders, tiny figures at this distance, were standing near the gate that crossed the road; and as Cyrus watched he saw them scatter and take cover.

So it was a trap, he told himself. He returned to his horse and rode down the slopes, his gaze on the road that curved westward toward Randado. He had traveled less than two miles when he saw the riders coming, and he veered toward them.

Natalie Hilderman, gracefully erect on the side saddle, rode in the lead. She drew up on recognizing Cyrus, and he touched the brim of his hat and glanced briefly at the five Barb riders, who rode on a little ways and then stopped.

Cyrus looked at the proud and handsome lines of the woman's face as he said, "I just came from above the pass. Stodor and his men are there. They cut your fence and drove forty or fifty steers across. You'll probably be able to see them after you go through the gate, but I wouldn't go in after them because it's a trap."

NATALIE touched her hair, which was the color of flax in the sunlight. "I see. Well, I expected something like that." She paused. "This makes twice you've gone out of your way to help Barb. It surprises me. I rather expected you to be against us."

"I'm neither for nor against Barb, Miss Hilderman. I happened to be riding this way and saw what was going on, that's all."

She watched him silently, then said, "You say you wouldn't go in after those cattle. Just what would you do, Mr. Croft?"

"Get the rest of your crew and run them out," Cyrus said curtly. He was about to turn away when she spoke again.

"Here's my crew, Mr. Croft. The rest quit when they learned that John had been killed."

"Hire more men.

Her smile was bitter. "I tried that today. But what idle men there are in town don't seem to want to work for Barb."

"Then I can't help you. There are twelve to fifteen men hidden out in those trees inside the pass. If your riders go in after those steers they'll take a beating, and then they'll probably quit too. You're in a bad spot, miss. If you ignore them, they'll have their foothold in the park. And if you give them trouble they'll probably claim that Barb was rustling those steers. Either way, you're in a bad spot."

If the news upset her, she didn't show it. "I'm still wondering what you would do, Mr. Croft." She paused. "Would you run, making believe it didn't happen?"

Cyrus scowled, momentarily surprised at her obvious contempt. "I'd circle, gather up a herd, and stampede them through the pass."

"Are you for hire, Mr. Croft?" She glanced at his guns.

"No."

"I didn't think so. I suppose now that you've spent a couple of days with your son, you'll be leaving again. Just another damn fool running from something."

Blood darkened Cyrus's cheeks. "Now look here," he began roughly.

"You lost your wife, didn't you? Well, I lost two brothers, mister, and not on account of an accident, either. But my father didn't run, and I'm not running now."

Cyrus said stiffly, "Suit yourself."

"You can bet on that," she answered flatly, and turned to the watching men. "Well, you heard him. What do you suggest, Chuck?"

Chuck, a heavy-set man with mild blue eyes, said, "We could stampede a herd through, all right. That'll drive those fellers out of there. But we'll have one hell of a time gathering that beef up again."

A lanky youth with big hands said, "Why couldn't we wait and hit 'em after dark, Miss Hilderman?"

"Ben, I just don't know." For the first time despair edged her voice. "I don't want to see any of you hurt."

Cyrus shifted uncomfortably in the saddle, unable to make himself leave. What the woman had said about his running from some-

thing had dug under his guard because he knew it to be true. He had run because of grief and despair, thinking to escape the past by leaving the scene of his tragedy. It had been a purely selfish move, and he was aware that somewhere within him he had known it all along.

He had shut the door against his young son. Then, unable to lock the boy out of his heart and his mind entirely, he had returned for another selfish reason, knowing all along that he would not stay.

Now he faced it, aware of disgust at himself. A damn fool running from something! He lowered his head, a lean and lonely man. Then he looked up and said harshly, "You people don't stand a chance of running them out, but I think I can handle it."

The woman turned to look at him. "We can do without your help," she said coldly.

Chuck said, "Hold on a minute, Miss Hilderman." Then he added, "How would you handle it, Croft?"

"Don't worry about it," Cyrus said. "You folks just stay put." He paused. "Did any of you see this fellow Sundance in town?"

"I saw that gelding of his in front of Durrant's saloon," Ben said.

"Why do you ask about him?" Natalie said sharply.

"Because he shot my son," Cyrus said, and galloped toward the park.

When he saw the gate before him, he broke down to a trot. A big, square-built man appeared from behind a tree with a rifle, and Cyrus crossed a ditch where muddy water flowed, then rode up to him.

He said, "How are you, Stodor?" and smiled.

"Well," Stodor said, "what the hell are you doing here, Croft?"

"I'm out riding. I stopped by Durrant's place and Slim told me you boys were up here." He looked around and grinned. "I see you pulled down some fence."

"Yeah," Stodor said, and looked around too. "Did you see Barb on the way?" he asked.

"I saw 'em at the cemetery when I left town."

"They're still there, I reckon," Stodor said. He turned and shouted, "There's no sign of 'em yet, so you boys might as well come from cover!"

ONE man showed, and then another, and then they came out of the trees and rocks from all sides. Cyrus recognized some of them, but at least ten out of the sixteen were strangers to him. They all carried rifles and wore waist guns, and were a rough bunch with expectancy in their faces. Two or three of them spoke to Cyrus. Then they sat around on the grass and smoked and talked among themselves.

Cyrus knew this had to be done quickly, if at all. He moved his horse right up against Stodor, pointed with his left arm, and said, "Someone's coming."

Stodor turned and looked, and so did the rest of them. Cyrus moved then. He locked his elbow under Stodor's chin and jerked the man's head back; at the same time he palmed his gun and put the muzzle against Stodor's shoulder.

He said flatly, "If anybody moves, your ramrod gets a busted shoulder."

He saw the startled looks on the faces below him. One man growled, "What the hell is this?"

Another said, "What about it, Stodor? Do you want us to take this joker?"

Stodor grunted. He had dropped his rifle and he had his fingers clamped on Cyrus's elbow. Now he twisted his head, his face red, and the edge of his gaze caught Cyrus. He grunted again.

"Hold it," he said thickly. "What do you have in mind, Croft?"

"I want to see all of their guns in a pile. Then I want 'em to drive those cattle back and put the fence up."

"Let's take him!" a man said. "I doubt if he'll shoot you, Stodor!"

Again the edge of Stodor's gaze caught Cyrus. "He means it, all right. Anyhow, I'm not going to find out; it's not worth it. You boys do as he says. We'll settle with him later."

"Throw your guns in a pile," Cyrus ordered, and they obeyed slowly, hating him with their eyes. When they were all unarmed. Cyrus told them to get their horses and drive the cattle across the fence. "No tricks," he

warned. "If anybody tries anything, you know what it means."

They followed his orders, moving in dead, sinister silence. Stodor said hoarsely, "You took the wrong side, Croft. I didn't expect it of you."

"I didn't expect you to fight a woman, either."

"She's Barb. We're fighting Barb."

"Of course you are," Cyrus said grimly.

The men had driven the cattle across, and now they were pulling the fence erect, the strands of barbed wire glittering in the sun.

"What about our guns?" a man yelled.

"They stay behind," Cyrus said, and told Stodor to take his waist gun from its holster and drop it. As he did so, Cyrus saw Natalie Hilderman and her men riding down the slope through the trees.

He looked back at Durrant's men and said, "Tie your horses to the fence and start walking." Some of them cursed violently.

Stodor twisted from Cyrus's grip, raging. "Damn you, that's going too far! It's seven miles to the ranch! What do you take us for?"

"Start walking," Cyrus said. Stodor swore at him and crawled between the strands of wire, then turned to face Natalie. "You picked the wrong joker, woman. Remember that when we take over!"

"You'll be a long time trying, Mr. Stodor," she answered acidly. "Now get going! We'll turn your horses loose at dark and they can drift back."

Stodor swore again, and trudged away at the head of his crew. Natalie said to Chuck, "Those guns go in the ditch." She crossed to Cyrus and looked steadily at him. "I owe you an apology, Mr. Croft."

"Forget it," Cyrus said curtly. "I suggest you hire plenty of men, if you have to go to Santa Fe to get them."

Her eyes turned cold. "So you're leaving after all," she said flatly. And then she added, with quick concern, "But you said your son had been shot."

"It doesn't amount to anything," Cyrus said.

"I'm glad. But I'm not happy to see you leave, even though I can't blame you for going. Those men won't forget what you did."

"I don't expect so," Cyrus answered shortly, and touched his hat. "Well, I wish you luck, miss."

"Luck," the woman said bitterly, and looked at him. "You're dead inside, aren't you? You give so much, and no more. You ran those men out and then you tell me to go to Santa Fe to hire more riders. That would take me a week or longer. What do you think Durrant will be doing in the meantime?"

Cyrus shifted impatiently in the saddle. "I can't help what he does."

"Especially after you left me holding the sack, as the saying goes."

"That's hardly fair," Cyrus said curtly. "You needed help and I helped. It doesn't mean I'm obliged to see this business through to a finish. I have myself and my son to consider."

"Your consideration for him came rather abruptly," Natalie said dryly. "These past two years, when the boy really needed a father, you weren't here."

"I know," Cyrus said, "and I'm not proud of the fact that I turned away from him. I know that now, and in a way I have you to thank for the change. So let's call it square."

"I will like hell!" Natalie said flatly. "You're still one favor up on me, mister, and Barb pays its debts." She gave him a scalding look. "Remember that," she said, and turned away, plainly finished with him.

Cyrus shrugged and rode through the gate. As he galloped way from the pass he could see Durrant's men hiking across a little hill in the distance. He wondered how long it would be before they started looking for him.

IT WAS dusk when he rode into Randado. He left the steeldust at the stable and walked to Hunter's house. A lamp burned in the kitchen, and so he went around to the back, knocked, and entered. Myra was slicing bread at the table.

She looked up, startled. "Where have you been all day?"

"Riding," he said briefly, and pushed back his hat. "How's Billy?"

"All right. I bandaged his arm when he woke up. Now he's asleep again. Cyrus, have you been looking for—" She broke off when she saw the holstered gun under his coat, and

she paled. "It's true, isn't it? You've been looking for Sundance."

He nodded. "Listen, Myra. Something happened today and I'm pulling out." He sighed, knowing this wasn't going to be easy. "I'm taking Billy with me."

"What? But Cyrus, why do you have to leave? And where will you go?"

"We'll take the morning stage to Santa Fe."

"Tomorrow's Sunday. The stage doesn't run on Sunday. Anyway, this is all foolish. You don't own anything to speak of," she said bitterly. "You turned most of the money you got for your ranch over to me to pay for Billy's keep. You can't just up and start out for Santa Fe with a five-year-old boy. What will you do there?"

"I'll find something. Maybe I'll start up some kind of business. I have enough money for that."

She regarded him anxiously, pleadingly. "But what about Billy? You can't just leave the boy in some hotel room."

"I can always rent a place and hire some woman to keep house for me. Anyway, those things will work out. The point is, it's better that I leave here. Billy lost his mother. I don't want him to lose his father, too."

"Is is that bad?"

"It could be," Cyrus said absently.

He was thinking there was no stage tomorrow. Well, they would have to wait until Monday. Meanwhile, he'd sell the steeldust and get straightened around. He felt Myra's fingers gripping his arm in a hungry sort of way. He had never seen such a desperate look of hope on a woman's face.

In a low and urgent voice she said, "Take me with you. I have some money of my own, almost three thousand dollars. Take me, Cyrus. I couldn't stand it if you took Billy away." Tears gathered in her eyes. "You don't know how lonely I get. I need you, honey."

She gave a little moan and surged against him, then pushed her mouth against his. He held her for a short moment, his arms wooden. She pushed away from him, her face pale and ravaged, her mouth working.

In a bitter voice she said, "What I want is not what you want, is it?"

Cyrus looked at her, and was surprised to find himself thinking of Natalie Hilderman, and wondering how he would have reacted to her kiss. He said gently, "I'm sorry, Myra."

She turned on him in sudden fury, tears running down her face. "Don't say that! Don't say you're sorry for me! I'll kill you if you say that again!" She was livid with fury. "I don't want you to feel anything for me. I just want you to get out of here."

What is there about a shrill woman? The compassion he had felt for her drained out of Cyrus, leaving him strangely indifferent. He said, "I didn't mean this to happen. And I can't help how I feel, Myra. We're not all put together the same way, you know."

Her lips pinched together. "I hate men. You do things for them and they treat you like dirt. Now take Billy and—"

She broke off as footsteps sounded outside. The door opened and Boone Hunter entered. He looked from one to the other. "What's going on here?"

"Cyrus is leaving," Myra said in a hard and brittle tone. "He's taking Billy with him."

What might have been relief showed momentarily in Hunter's eyes. "Well, I'm sorry to hear that." And then he added, "How is Billy?"

Cyrus turned on Myra and saw her puzzled frown. "Did you tell him?" he asked quickly.

"Why, no,"

Cyrus swung to Hunter. "Who told you?"

Hunter blinked his eyes, confused. "Told me what?"

"You know what! Who told you that Billy's been shot?"

"Why, I didn't know."

"Boone, don't lie to me! You wouldn't be asking how he is if you didn't know he'd been hurt."

Hunter's eyes turned flinty. "All right, Durrant told me. He wanted to know what you were aiming to do about it."

Cyrus punched a fist into his hand. "All right, now you listen to me, Boone. Durrant's leading you right into a mess of trouble, do you know that? Unless you're completely stupid, you should know that Durrant staged John Breton's death. He paid Sundance to kill Breton. And today his gang moved against Barb."

Hunter asked, "How did you find out?"

"The question is, did you know what they were fixing to do? Did you, Boone? Barb's been a good customer of yours through the years. Are you helping to stab 'em in the back now, just because you saw a chance to make a dollar?"

Hunter reddened. "I don't have to take that kind of guff from you."

Cyrus said softly, "So it's true. You did know what Durrant had up his sleeve."

"What if I did!" Hunter burst out. "Hilderman's dead and Barb's finished. Sure, Durrant's taking over. If he doesn't, someone else will!"

"You're kind of getting ahead of yourself, aren't you? In the first place, Barb is far from finished. And in the second place, there isn't any 'someone else' taking over. Durrant's the only one. He's the fellow behind the whole rotten business."

"And he'll end up running it," Hunter said with sneering smugness. "After today—"

Cyrus smiled. "His bunch didn't get very far today. Do you want to know why, Boone? Because I stopped them."

"That's a lie! How could you?"

CYRUS caught Hunter by the lapels of his coat and jerked him off balance. Then he shoved him contemptuously away. "Don't you call me a liar."

"I hate to say it, but I don't think he's lying, at that," Myra said coldly. "He said he was leaving because there'd been trouble, and that was probably what he was talking about."

Suddenly Hunter looked worried. "What happened?" he asked anxiously.

"Ask Durrant," Cyrus said. "He seems to know all the answers."

He walked into Billy's room and came out with the sleeping boy across his shoulder, the music box under his arm. He looked at Myra. She stared back with hard eyes. Hunter's expression was sullen, and Cyrus could feel them united against him. The rejected woman and her money-hungry father, he thought. Myra had flung her bounty at him and he had rejected her offer, so now she hated him—as she must still hate that drummer Barbara had mentioned.

"I shudder to think of what she'll do if the next man she falls in love with rejects her too," Barbara had said. Remembering this, Cyrus felt a pang of pity. He looked at Hunter, and knew the man was worrying about what had happened at Spruce Park today, worrying about his investment.

"It's funny," Cyrus murmured. "I counted you as my friends, and I never really knew you at all."

"Then it's about time you found out," Myra said coldly. "You can't toy with a person's emotions and not get hurt yourself."

"Hurt?" Cyrus said. "I'm not hurt. I just think it's an awful pity."

"Get out," she snarled.

Cyrus smiled. "I'll be back for Billy's clothes and things in the morning," he said, and left the house.

Billy mumbled sleepily when Cyrus put the boy to bed in the hotel room, and then his breathing became regular again. Cyrus touched a flushed cheek with his lips, then straightened and sighed softly, aware of tension. Sundance was on his mind. He weighed the situation coldly.

Whatever skill he had possessed with a gun was gone, and he knew he could not hope to outdraw the little gunman. Nor could he allow himself to let the situation slide. All told, it was hardly worth bothering about, and it was certainly not worth getting killed over, but at the same time he had to settle with Sundance. So the only thing to do was to beat the man to within an inch of his life.

As Cyrus was getting ready to leave, someone knocked. He opened the door carefully and was startled to see Natalie Hilderman. He stepped back and she entered quickly, her face agitated.

She said abruptly, "If you mean to settle with Sundance, you'll find him shooting dice at Durrant's place."

Cyrus murmured, "Getting rid of his blood money, is he?"

She said, "So you also believe that he was paid to kill John Breton?"

"It looks that way." He paused, then added dryly, "But don't tell me you rode all the way to town to look him up, just so you could tell me where to find him."

She flushed. "I told the boys that you might run into more trouble than you can handle. Right now they're downstairs, and

they'll back your play all the way. I told you Barb pays its debts."

"Why don't you just send your men over to the saloon and have them shoot Durrant?" said Cyrus. "That's another way of getting him off your back."

Her eyes hardened. She said deliberately, "Damn you for thinking that I'm using you to get at Durrant." Cyrus watched her and said nothing. "There's one more thing," she went on crisply. "Stodor must have picked up a horse somewhere, because we just saw him enter the saloon."

"Alone?"

"Yes. We turned their horses loose, but they'll be a long time rounding them up. So you—" She broke off when she saw Billy in the bed, and her mouth grew soft. "I didn't know you had your son with you. I thought he would be staying at Hunter's house."

"Hunter and I," said Cyrus, "had a little misunderstanding." He hesitated. "In case you don't already know this, he and Durrant are partners in a cattle deal. They're getting in a big herd next month. That's one reason they're after Barb."

"They must have laid their plans about the time Dad got sick," Natalie said. Her smile was thin and hard. "But there's more to it than that, Mr. Croft. When Durrant first settled here, he and Dad were fairly friendly. Then when Durrant took to calling on me, Dad objected and they had words."

"And I suppose you sided your father."

"I did not!" she said indignantly. "I have a mind of my own; I don't need to be dominated. So I continued to see the man, until I really got to understand him. He was tricky and evasive, and I told him so and never went with him again."

She paused. "That was about the time we began to notice that we were losing cattle, and the answer was pretty obvious." She looked at Cyrus. "I want you to know that Dad didn't have it in mind to burn you out two years ago. He was after Durrant and Staats and one other small outfit. He knew you weren't in the rustling end with them."

Cyrus shrugged. "That's water under the bridge."

He swung to the door, for he had heard footsteps stop outside. Someone rapped sharply. He motioned Natalie to one side and opened. Myra stood there, a paper-wrapped bundle in her arms. "Here," she said harshly, and pushed it at him. "Here are Billy's things. Now we won't have to be bothered by you in the morning."

She had started to turn away when she glimpsed Natalie. She gasped. Her mouth fell open and a glaze came over her eyes. Then she gave a brittle laugh. "Oh, I'm glad Barbara is dead!" she said in a nasty tone. "I'm glad she'll never know that you're consorting with the woman whose father was responsible for her murder."

"Why, damn you!" Natalie blazed, and tried to get past Cyrus. But he shut the door in Myra's face.

Natalie stared at him, her face flushed and angry. "Her father wasn't the only one you had a misunderstanding with. What happened between you two?"

"Nothing worth mentioning."

"You don't have to tell me; I can guess." She made a grim sound of amusement. "Did you see that look on her face? If she'd had a gun she'd have shot both of us."

"You'd better go," Cyrus said tonelessly.

Natalie looked at him a moment longer, wordless and amused, then turned and went out. Cyrus waited a few minutes. He unbuckled his gunbelt and put it in a bureau drawer. Then he doused the lamp and left the room quietly.

THE saloon was noisy when he entered. Men made a solid line at the bar, most of the tables were filled, and the gambling layouts were getting a big play. Cyrus's entrance went unobserved in the general hubbub. A fat man wearing a derby was pounding a piano, and the gaudy dresses of Durrant's house girls put splashes of color on the small dance floor.

Cyrus noticed Durrant near the stairs that led up to the living quarters. As usual, the woman called Kate was at his elbow. He was talking with Stodor. They did not see Cyrus as he made his way around the dance floor and stopped in the entrance of an alcove where men were shooting pool.

He looked around and saw Sundance at one of the long dice tables, his bearded little face

eager, one hand clutching a wad of crumpled bills. Cyrus shouldered his way through the press and came up behind him. He lifted Sundance's gun from its holster and tossed it on the green felt. All sound around the table died, and silence spread slowly through the room. Sundance stared at the gun, his elbows resting on the table's high side bord. He sent an enraged glanced across his shoulder at Cyrus, then uttered a grunt and lunged for his gun.

Cyrus grabbed Sundance's right arm, and what he did he did very quickly. Gripping the arm by the elbow and the wrist, he brought it down across the side board. There was an audible *snap* as the arm broke. Sundance screamed and flopped half across the table. He continued to scream as Cyrus turned and looked at the stunned faces around him.

He said, speaking loud enough so that everyone in the place could hear, "Your gunfighter won't be much good to you after this, Durrant. He won't be killing old men and shooting at kids any more."

There was a moment of silence. Then the crowd shifted like cattle beginning to stir. A houseman broke through to Cyrus and grabbed him roughly. As Cyrus struck him in the face, someone else clouted him from behind. He heard a shrill whoop and saw Chuck, the Barb man, snap a pool cue in half and dive into the midst of the fight. Somewhere a table overturned and a second fight started. There were curses, harsh breathing, rough shouts. A chair flew through the air, and the ornate bar mirror shattered into silvery slivers of glass.

A couple of shots were fired, but whether out of anger or pure excitement, Cyrus didn't know. Men started to run out of the place then, leaving behind a shambles of broken tables and chairs. Cyrus caught a glimpse of Chuck swinging the pool cue, and fought his way over to him and pulled him around.

"Get your men out of here! You're only hurting Barb by staying."

"What about you?"

"I'll make out."

Someone plunged into him then, and he heard Durrant shout, "Grab him before he gets away!"

Then two of them were holding his arms. Durrant's wild gaze swept the room and settled on Cyrus. "Mister, I could have used you, but you just bought yourself a one-way ticket out of here."

"You used me once already," Cyrus said.

He got an arm loose, and at the same time glimpsed someone moving behind him. He did not see the swung bottle. It struck the back of his head and then there was pain, and then darkness.

When he woke up and found himself in a cell, he wasn't surprised. Pain hammered within his skull. A gray dawn showed beyond the barred window. He rose from the bunk and rattled the door, yelling. The door at the end of the corridor opened and a lanky man entered.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Cyrus said urgently, "It's about my son. He's at the hotel."

"I know that. Miss Hilderman's taking care of him. She'll be in later on this morning." The turnkey went out, closing the door.

Cyrus sighed with relief. He fingered his aching head tenderly. Then he went back to the bunk and waited for time to pass.

Sunlight was slanting through the barred window when Natalie finally arrived. Billy, she said, was fine. She had explained to him that he was going to stay with his Daddy for a while, but that today his Daddy was away on business. They'd had breakfast, and after church they were going to the cemetery to visit with his mother.

"As for you," Natalie said, smiling ruefully, "we'll get you out in the morning. I spoke to my lawyer last night, and he'll be here with the bail money."

"Bail money? Why bail money? I didn't commit a crime."

"Well, it seems Durrant might prefer charges. His place was wrecked, and I suppose he can demand to collect for the damages."

"All I wrecked was his gunfighter, so he'll not get a dime out of me," Cyrus said. Then he added, "Your crew get out of town all right?"

"They're at the ranch." Natalie smiled. "I understand you really started something when you spoke out against Durrant. Folks are be-

ginning to wonder if what you said is true."

"Good," Cyrus said grimly. "I've been doing a lot of thinking, and I've made my mind up about one thing—I'm staying until this business with Durrant is settled one way or the other."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, and I think I understand."

"I'm not sure I do myself, except that Durrant is at the bottom of it. He used me two years ago. I was stupid not to realize it at the time, but now I know it for sure. All his spouting off about law and order didn't mean a thing. He was just smart enough to realize that Barbara's death made me a martyr of sorts, and that a lot of folks would side me against Barb because of what had happened to her. The minute I came back the other day he wanted me on his side again. He said he could use me, and that's what sticks in my craw. You were certainly right when you said he was tricky."

SHE nodded, and left soon afterward, saying she would return later in the day. Cyrus was pacing back and forth across the small cell when the turnkey brought him his breakfast. He had finished eating when Yager came up to the door and said, "I hear you and your kid plan to leave town in the morning."

"You must have been talking to Hunter," Cyrus told him.

Yager said, "Unless Duke presses charges, you'd better be on that Santa Fe stage."

"Sure," Cyrus said grimly. "I started something and he wants me out of town. Does he pay you your wages, Yager?"

Yager shrugged. "You used to be in my end of the business; you know how it is. A man plays 'em the way he sees 'em." He paused. "Here's something I want you to understand, though. You hinted last night that Durrant hired Sundance to kill Breton. If he did, I didn't know about it, and that's the truth."

"You knew Sundance was holed up at my old place," Cyrus said.

"That's right. I didn't want him in town." Yager paused again. "You know what he is, and you put him out of business. He'll never be any good with a gun again. I'm telling you that in the way of a warning," he said, and walked away.

Natalie came again at dusk, saying she was taking Billy out to the ranch so the boy wouldn't learn that Cyrus was in jail. "If I keep him here, he might find out in the morning," she said. Cyrus agreed, and said he'd see them at the ranch tomorrow.

Yager released Cyrus after breakfast. Bail was not necessary because Durrant was not pressing charges. "Either leave or pull in your horns," Yager said. "Remember that I warned you."

"That's fine," Cyrus said. "Now pass this along to Durrant. The next time he makes a move against Barb, he'll find out just how big a troublemaker I can be. You tell him that."

Yager gave a short laugh, and Cyrus went out, thinking he had gotten off easier than he had expected. He guessed that Durrant was worried, really worried, after that business last night. Cyrus had as good as told the whole town that Durrant had hired Sundance to kill John Breton, and that was probably the very reason Durrant hadn't pressed charges; he hadn't wanted the incident to be aired in court.

It showed a weakness in the man that Cyrus hadn't known was there. An arrogant, forceful man would have pressed charges regardless, and demanded proof if Cyrus accused him of planning Breton's death. That would have ended it right there. But then Durrant was tricky, Cyrus thought. He had to remember that Durrant was tricky.

He collected his gear at the hotel, paid the bill, and picked up his steeldust. He took the road out of town, and some two hours later entered Spruce Park. He rode on through the dappled shade of the trees. He was wondering what Durrant would try next, when a man stepped into view and leveled a rifle at him. It was Stodor. Cyrus's instant furious thought was, I should have known better!

There was no time to turn and ride, for Stodor wasn't alone. Men came from the trees, and Cyrus fought in silence as they pulled him out of the saddle and flung him down in the road's dust. Then they hauled him erect and held him.

Stodor said, "Weren't you heading the

wrong way, Mr. Croft?" Then he added, "Ask him, Bull," and a huge, grinning man stepped up and smashed his fist into Cyrus's belly.

Cyrus didn't know how long the beating went on; he knew only that it lasted until his knees buckled under him, and they let him fall. Stodor said, "You were heading the wrong way, Mr. Croft. Santa Fe's in the other direction. See that you go there."

Cyrus got his feet under him and shook his head. "No," he said.

Stodor grunted. "All right, Bull. This time ask him to his face."

Bull struck, and Cyrus staggered back. He heard rather than felt his nose go. The bones crunched and blood flowed across his lips. Bull hit him again and knocked him down.

Stodor said, "That does it. We have to leave him fit to travel." He bent over Cyrus. "You'll find your horse at the fence. We know your kid's at Barb, so when you get to Santa Fe you can send for him. Bull, you stick with him until he gets past town. We don't want him going through town. All right, boys, let's go."

They went for their horses and rode away, one leading the steeldust. Bull walked his horse over to Cyrus. "Get on your feet."

Pain was like a vise as Cyrus staggered up and walked forward, half bent over. Bull rode a little in advance, watching him with sneering amusement. Cyrus fell three times before they reached the gate. The last time he picked up a rock the size of his fist and held it pressed under his coat, as though he were pressing against the pain that shook him.

He came around the steeldust and put his left hand on the pommel. He stared at Bull across the saddle and licked blood from his lips. When Cyrus had hauled himself into leather, Bull started to turn. He was six feet away when Cyrus threw the rock, aiming for the back of Bull's head. But Bull glimpsed the movement and turned his head, and the rock struck the side of his jaw. It made a solid *crack*. Bull sagged and shook his head blindly, but he didn't fall.

Before the big man could gather his stunned senses, Cyrus slid down, grabbed him by the belt, and pulled him out of the saddle. Bull landed solidly on his back. Cyrus dragged him to the fence, gripped him under the arms, half lifted, half pushed him against a post, and slugged the big man until his own arms were leaden.

There was a tearing sound as Bull slid down and folded over on his face. The barbed wire had ripped through his shirt and into his hide, leaving long bloody streaks. With strength that came from cold rage, Cyrus threw the big man across his saddle and tied him securely, then sent the horse running. He washed his face at the ditch and hauled himself aboard the steeldust, the thought of what lay ahead gathering with dark certainty.

IN THE mirror above the fireplace in the Barb ranch house, Cyrus looked at his face. A wide strip of tape held the broken bones of his nose in place, and the skin below both of his eyes was beginning to turn blue. From the chest down, his body felt as though it had been pounded with clubs. He turned and looked at Natalie and her crew.

"So that's it. Now it's up to you. I told Yager I was a Barb man, and that the next time they struck at Barb there'd be trouble. But it means a fight, and some of you are going to get hurt. On top of that, Durrant has the law on his side. Do you still want to go through with it?"

Natalie looked from one man to the next, then back at Cyrus. "Yes," she said. "What are we going to do?"

"Hit Durrant where it hurts," Cyrus said.

Chuck grunted. "I know just the place. They spent yesterday gathering a herd. We could stampede those cattle."

"That'll do as a starter," Cyrus said. "What we're going to do is keep Durrant's men off balance and so damned busy that they won't have time to think. We're going to raise such a big stink that the reek'll reach clear to Fort Stanton. We're going to force Durrant's hand until he gets desperate and makes the wrong move. It's the only way to beat him."

Gamby, a stocky little man, said, "We're not going to be able to keep 'em so damned busy they can't hit back, though."

"They'll hit back," Cyrus agreed grimly, and looked at Natalie. "They might end up by burning this place down, but that's part

of the price you'll have to pay. Are you willing?"

She looked around at the huge room with its deep-set windows and beamed ceiling. "If it comes to that, yes," she said. "But what about Billy?"

Cyrus walked to a front window. Billy was in the yard playing with one of the ranch dogs, and he was laughing. "You'll take him to town and stay there with him," he said. When he turned, he saw her face stiffen in protest. "Don't argue," he said. "This isn't something for women and children. Besides, you can do a lot of good in town by talking to folks."

She nodded reluctantly. "But this might last for days. Where will you stay all that time?"

"We'll keep on the move," Cyrus said. "We'll have to, because there's no doubt that Yager and a posse will be out hunting us. So we'll do most of our work at night, and hole up when we're not riding. Do any of you know of a good place?"

Natalie looked at Chuck. "How about where those rock ledges are located? You know, up there where Boulder Canyon runs into Pine Canyon?"

Chuck nodded thoughtfully. "That's a good spot. It's about five mile south of here," he explained to Cyrus. "Rough country. You'll see it before we stampede that beef tonight."

"Fine," Cyrus said. "Now let's get to work. We have a lot to do before dark."

The sun had lowered behind a distant range of mountains, and dusk was spreading across the land. From where he and Gamby crouched in the trees, Cyrus could see the herd on the meadow below, a chuckwagon to one side—with smoke rising from the cooking fire—and men sitting or moving around. One, he thought, was Meany, working at the fire. He could see, at intervals, the nighthawks who had ridden out to keep watch on the cattle that had now bedded down.

This meadow was on the down slopes beyond which lay Spruce Park, and it was obvious that the herd had been gathered with the idea of driving it across in the morning. Cyrus, very conscious of the dynamite stick in his coat pocket, wondered if Chuck and the others had reached their designated places.

He thought of all they had done since his arrival at Barb. While Natalie prepared what food there was in the house, the men had carried what valuables and cherished possessions she wanted saved, to a long-abandoned root cellar well away from the house, and they had loaded a wagon with still more plunder.

The dynamite, used mainly to clear the surroundings streams of obstructions caused by flotsam that in time formed natural dams, had been kept in the cellar, and the sight of it had brought a smile to Cyrus's face. Now they were just about ready to make their move. Natalie and Billy should reach town about the time it started.

Cyrus looked again toward the camp as Gamby gripped his arm and whispered, "Some of 'em are moving out."

Cyrus stiffened, and grunted with dismay. A half-dozen men had mounted their horses at the picket line and were heading almost directly toward their place of concealment. They were going to scout Barb, Cyrus guessed. But this was not what dismayed him. Our horses are back there in the trees, he thought, with sudden apprehension. If one of them whinnies, we're sunk.

He had expected their imminent attack to come as a stunning surprise, catching all but the nighthawks on foot. Now there was a good chance that they would be stopped before they started.

He said to Gamby, "You'll have to see what you can do about keeping those horses quiet. There's no time to move them. If there's any noise and they investigate, ride like hell and leave the horses behind."

Gamby slipped away without a word. Cyrus palmed his gun and sank down in the grass. He could hear the riders now—creaking leather, the jingle of bit rings, hoof sound, and, finally, a man's curt voice.

CYRUS froze to immobility as the riders passed less than a dozen feet away. They were not expecting trouble from this quarter, perhaps were not expecting it at all, and he knew it was this alone that saved him from being spotted. But he continued to hold his breath after the sound of their passage receded, listening, now, for the sound he dreaded to hear, the sudden shrill whinny

of a horse who knows his own kind is within earshot.

Ten minutes passed, and he heard nothing, only the wind stirring the tree tops. He realized he was sweating. Then Gamby slipped up, his teeth showing in a grin. "Man, it was close. I snugged the horses up tight, all with their heads together. One of 'em blew, about the time that bunch passed me, but nothing happened."

"We'll have to give them time to get well into the park."

"That's what I figured."

They waited, and then it was time. They moved out of the trees and down the slope. Cyrus stopped behind a few low rocks. He could see the nearest cattle faintly, and he could smell them and hear them as he secured the dynamite stick between two rocks so that the spluttering fuse could not be seen by a passing nighthawk.

Once Gamby touched his elbow, and they sank down and froze as a rider passed at a walk, humming softly to himself. After giving the man time to get clear, Cyrus cupped a match and touched its flame to the fuse. He counted to ten in his mind, and then the two men hurried back to the trees, Cyrus still counting. There was no sound of alarm. Cyrus pointed his gun at the sky and pulled the trigger. The crack of the shot was the signal for Chuck and the others to light their fuses.

After that, things happened very quickly. The sound of the shot seemed still to be hanging in the air, and mixed up in it was the bellow of a single steer, when the earth erupted with a low, roaring *boom* and a great flash of flame. In the sudden light that was there and gone, Cyrus saw cattle lurching to their feet.

Then he said, "Let's go!" and he and Gamby were running up the slope, as a second explosion tore the night apart two hundred yards down from the first. They had reached the horses when the third ripping explosion had the animals jerking at their reins.

They mounted and rode down the slope, each man leading two horses. They could hear the frantic bawling of cattle, the earth-shaking thud of hoofs as the steers began to run like a single great beast. Cyrus called sharply, "Chuck!" and saw Chuck and his partner run forward. Then Ben and the other man came forward. When they were all mounted, Cyrus said grimly, "That was a good beginning. Now let's see what we can do next."

They swung their horses, then, and rode south in the darkness.

In the gray dawn, Cyrus sat against a rock eating a cold beef sandwich, and looking down across the great rock ledges that ended at the junction of two deep canyons. A stream splashed to one side, and steep walls loomed all around. The horses were tied out of sight, the men wrapped in their blankets, and Ben was standing guard below. It was the third morning since Cyrus's release from jail, and he was thinking of all they had done since they had stampeded the herd.

That same night they had struck at Durrant's home ranch, and had left it in flames. Staats's old place had been next on their list, and less than three hours ago Cyrus had watched grimly as his men burned down the house and buildings that had once been his.

Now Durrant had no place to quarter his men, no place except his saloon to use as headquarters. Even his chuckwagon had been ruined in the stampede. From now on he would have a problem feeding his men and keeping them in line.

What puzzled Cyrus was that Durrant had not as yet retaliated by raiding and burning Barb. Twice Cyrus and his men had almost tangled with the others, but they had escaped in the darkness both times, after a furious exchange of gunfire. Gamby had suffered a slight wound, but was still able to ride. Cyrus was wondering what Durrant had up his sleeve, when he saw Ben face toward him and wave frantically.

Cyrus rose, a lean man with a stubbled face, and eyes that were dry and red from lack of sleep. He saw two riders stop and speak to Ben. When they rode forward he saw with a shock that they were Natalie and Durrant.

He noted the way Natalie rode erect, and the rigid set of her face. Durrant had a dishevelled look about him, as though he had slept in his clothes, and his features seemed pale and gaunt and somehow shaken. Cyrus stepped to meet them, his rifle swinging from his left hand. He heard the men stir behind him, heard an amazed grunt.

Then he forgot them as he looked at Natalie

and said, "What is this supposed to mean?"

"It means that there's been enough trouble." Her voice was flat, toneless, and nothing showed in her eyes. "Duke and I made a deal, and there's to be no more burning and raiding."

Cyrus looked at her closely. "A deal? What kind of a deal?"

Durrant said testily, "That's none of your business, Croft."

But Cyrus ignored him. He continued to look steadily at Natalie. "What kind of a deal?" he repeated.

Her lips tightened. "We're splitting Barb. And you're out of it. There's time for you to catch the stage, and we want you and Billy to be on it."

"I see," Cyrus murmured. Despite his outward calm, he felt disgust and resentment knife all through him. He waited for a hint, a sign perhaps, anything to show that she didn't mean what she said. But none came. Contempt narrowed Cyrus's eyes. "What about your men?" he asked Natalie harshly.

"They're still on my payroll," she said. "You never were. You just sort of hired yourself."

Cyrus looked at Durrant. "So that's the way it is." His gaze returned to the woman. "I suppose it helped that he didn't put Barb to the torch."

She flushed. "Maybe it did. Dad spent half his life building Barb, and I don't want to see it burned down."

Cyrus said, "I don't think your father would have much respect for you now, Miss Hilderman." He made a grim sound of laughter. "What a waste," he murmured. Then he added, "All right; this time I *want* to pull out. I hope that suits the both of you."

OBVIOUS relief showed on Natalie's face. "It suits me just fine. You boys can go back to the ranch," she told the others, and then turned her horse. "Let's go, Duke."

They trotted away, the shod hoofs of their horses clattering on the rock ledges. Cyrus turned to the men and said brusquely, "Well, that's that. You all heard her. The party's over, boys."

Chuck said to no one in particular, "I don't get it." He shook his head. "It's not like Miss Hilderman to give up so easy."

"You heard her," Cyrus repeated. He rolled up his spread-out blankets, then lashed them tight with two pieces of cord. He went over to the steeldust that he had left saddled, the cinch loose, and strapped his gear behind the cantle, then tightened the cinch. When he turned back to the men, they were watching him.

He grinned faintly, ruefully, then went over and shook hands with them. "Maybe I'll cut your trail again," he said. Then he swung into the saddle, gave them a wave of his hand, and rode away.

He sold the steeldust and his saddle to the owner of the livery stable, and found Billy looking lonely and sleepy in the hotel lobby, the parcel of clothing at his feet, the music box on his lap. When Cyrus asked if Natalie had gotten him ready, the boy nodded and looked away. Cyrus was too worn out and preoccupied with his own thoughts to do more than tousle Billy's hair, saying he was going upstairs to shave, and the boy should wait.

When he came down, he settled his bill and then walked with his son to the depot. It was a fine sunny morning. The street, the town, was quiet and hushed; it seemed impossible that violence had ever erupted here.

There wasn't a sign of a friendly face as they approached the depot. A few idlers stood around waiting for the stage to pull out, their expressions guardedly curious. Cyrus stowed their gear in the coach and lifted Billy inside, then went to the depot and bought the tickets. When he turned to leave he saw Yager in the doorway, watching him closely.

"I wouldn't have believed it," the sheriff said.

Cyrus did not answer. He had that half-bitter, half-enraged feeling of a man who can't wait to leave behind what has disgusted him, and yet senses vaguely that he is walking away from unfinished business. He started past Yager, and the sheriff stepped aside with a short laugh.

"I wouldn't have believed it about her, either," he said. "I figured she had all of old Hilderman's gumpton and some to spare, but I reckon I was wrong."

"Don't hash it over with me," Cyrus said.

Yager shrugged. "Hell, you got the short end, that's all. Don't blame me. You were fighting over open graze. If it'd been patented land, it would've been something else again. Then it would've been my place to take the owner's side—Barb's or any other outfit's. But the way it was, I had a chance to grind my own ax, and I took it. It's the top dogs like Durrant who put me in office and keep me there; don't forget that."

"Sure," Cyrus murmured, for it was certainly true.

Hilderman had claimed a certain amount of land, and when he had held it, it had been his. Then he had died and Durrant had stepped in, and that's all there was to it.

Cyrus entered the coach as the driver climbed to the seat. They left town at a brisk trot. Cyrus sat across from Billy, who had curled up on the seat and was asleep. Then he saw that the boy was watching him through half-closed eyes, and he smiled.

"Feel bad about leaving, son?"

The boy's mouth worked, but he did not answer. Well, it was a strange leavetaking for him, Cyrus thought. There had been no time for a last good-by to Myra or Hunter; they had grabbed a stage and pulled out. Cyrus sighed, thinking that they must come back again to visit Barbara's grave—maybe next year, if everything worked out. A year made a lot of difference in a boy Billy's age. Now was the time to consider their immediate future.

But, as the miles rolled behind them, he became aware of Billy's unnatural silence. He said rather curtly, "What's wrong, son? Didn't you get any sleep last night? Don't you want to see the country?"

The boy put a hand over his mouth and continued to look at Cyrus, but he said nothing. Cyrus sighed. Well, it had turned out to be a mess all around. There was the shooting of Myra and her father; then Natalie's giving in to Durrant because she had thought more of Barb than of her own integrity. He let his mind dwell on her, and felt he despised her for what she had done. The hell of it was that he had begun to think a lot of her.

Durrant had what he wanted and that was the end of it, Cyrus thought. He was well out of it now. A man shouldn't fight for something unless he believed in it truly and was willing to give everything he had. Whether you won or lost didn't really matter, Cyrus thought; just so you didn't concede, the way the woman had, in order to save your skin.

BILLY said softly, "Are we ever going to see her again?" Cyrus was surprised to see tears in the boy's eyes.

"Maybe some day you'll see Myra again, son. Now we're going to Santa Fe. You'll like it there; it's much bigger than Randado."

"I don't mean Myra," Billy said.

Cyrus frowned. "You mean Natalie?"

The boy nodded. "She was nicer than Myra."

Cyrus paused, awkward and uncertain. The boy had only been around Natalie a day or two, while Myra had taken care of him for two years. Was his childish perception so acute that he had sensed a difference between them? It seemed impossible.

"Myra was nice too, son. She took good care of you. I want you always to remember that she was nice."

Billy's eyes widened. "She wasn't nice last night," he blurted.

Cyrus said, "When did you see her last night?"

The boy covered his face with his hands. Cyrus reached over and forced him to sit up. When he pulled the boy's hands away they were wet with tears.

Cyrus said gently, "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"I can't," the boy sobbed. "I promised."

"Who did you make the promise to?"

"Natalie. She said it was bad to break a promise, and for me never to tell."

Cyrus's hands tightened on Billy's shoulders. "She was right. But there are times when what you promise not to tell is worse than not keeping the promise. So if it is worse, it's all right to tell me." Cyrus paused. "Did it have to do with Myra?"

The boy nodded.

"Then you did see Myra last night."

Again Billy nodded.

"Where did you see her, son?"

"At the hotel. I was asleep when she woke me up. She said we were going to see you, and then we went to the house."

Cyrus felt his face stiffen. "Didn't anyone see you?"

"We went down the back stairs through the alley. Then when we got to the house she put me to bed. She was mad and slapped me when I cried because you weren't there."

"Slapped you? Then what happened?"

"A man came. I could hear him talking with Mr. Hunter and Myra. They talked real loud and sounded mad, and they said something about you. Then I went to sleep, and then Myra woke me up and we went back to the hotel. It was still dark. Then I went to sleep again, and then Natalie woke me up and got me dressed. That's when she made me promise." The boy put his arms around Cyrus's neck and cried.

Cyrus took Billy on his lap then. The boy's sobs subsided gradually and he fell asleep. Cyrus had felt no immediate anger; he had only been aware of shock and dismay. He remembered Myra's saying, "I'll kill you!" when he had said that he was sorry she felt the way she did about him.

It came to him with astonishing clarity that beneath Myra's brittle restlessness lay a turbulent violence, and that she was capable of carrying out what he had considered an idle threat. She used the boy she had helped to raise to get back at me, Cyrus thought.

For the answer was obvious. Myra had taken Billy, and Durrant was mixed up in it. They had wanted him out of the country and they had used Billy. One of them had put the pressure on Natalie, and she had given in in order to save the boy from possible harm. It was obvious, and yet Cyrus had trouble believing it. Didn't they stop to realize what they were doing? Cyrus thought.

He had forced Durrant into a corner, of course. That was part of it. Then there was the way Myra felt. Yes, he could understand now why Myra had acted as she did. What was that saying about no one having fury like a woman scorned?

Cyrus looked through the window as the coach slowed down and turned into the yard of the relay station. A hostler, hitching up a fresh team of horses at the corral, straightened and waved; another man stepped from the adobe house. The driver climbed down and opened the door.

He said, "Fifteen minutes," and turned away.

Cyrus put Billy on the opposite seat and stepped down to stretch his legs. He noticed that the station agent looked at him curiously, and guessed that the news of what had happened had reached here.

He stamped his boots and took a gusty breath, and he was like that when the shrill voice said, "Over here, Croft!"

For the split part of a second, Cyrus stood stone still. Then he moved desperately. He threw himself headlong away from the coach, his hand clawing his coat aside, clawing for his gun. As he hit the ground and rolled, he had a blurred picture of the driver and the station agent plunging to one side, and of Sundance at the corner of the house, his right arm in a sling, the barrel of a shotgun resting across it.

He had his own gun clear of leather when Sundance fired. Something as hot as fire touched his leg, and he thought frantically, he'll shoot Billy next! He snapped a shot at the thin figure.

He knew as he pulled the trigger that he would miss, but even so it was close enough to move Sundance out of his tracks, and the little man did not fire. His face looked gray and pinched as he moved. In that instant, Billy screamed, and Sundance slanted a glance that way.

CYRUS knew this was his chance, his last chance. He aimed carefully as Sundance's head snapped back. Cyrus fired, and the bullet punched Sundance above his belt. Cyrus fired again and then rose as the little man staggered back and sprawled in the dust.

Then Cyrus was holding Billy, shielding him, saying, "It's all right, son. Everything's all right." He looked at the station agent. "Get him away from there," he said, indicating the body.

The agent's face was gray. "Mister, I didn't know what he was fixing to do. He came in a buggy and parked around in back. He had a couple of drinks and then wandered outside."

"Cart him away," Cyrus said wearily.

He straightened when he saw riders on the

road. The riders turned into the yard, and Chuck jumped down and ran over, his gaze taking in what had happened.

He said, "We came here figuring to talk to you because we felt there was something funny about this whole business. But we didn't expect this."

"You were right—there is something funny," Cyrus said, and explained what Billy had told him. "So Natalie had a good reason for what she did. Where is she now?"

"I don't know. In town, I reckon. We cut across country. Cyrus, you're bleeding."

"It's nothing to worry about. A man doesn't get shot every day, does he, Billy?"

Billy's mouth trembled, but he managed a smile. "That's the man who shot me," he said.

"Well, he won't shoot anybody else," the stage driver said. "He's deader'n a doornail."

Ben said, "Do you suppose Durrant sent him? Or did he come on his own?"

Cyrus said grimly, "That's one thing I aim to find out. Gamby, as soon as I get this leg bandaged, I mean to borrow your horse, and I want you to stay here and look after Billy. The rest of you boys can tag along with me, if you've a mind to."

"All the way," Chuck said. "Let's get that leg bandaged."

They dismounted at the stable. Cyrus said, "You boys stay here until I need you," and walked up the street to Yager's office.

The sheriff was working at his desk when Cyrus entered. He looked up, startled. "I must be seeing things," he said.

Cyrus gave him a speculative look. "You haven't been seeing enough," he said. "Come along, we're going to call on Hunter. After that it's up to you—or I call a U.S. Marshal in on this."

Yager grabbed his hat. "Hold on a minute," he began, but Cyrus had already left the office. Yager hurried after him.

They entered Hunter's store and made their way back to the small office. When they stepped inside, Hunter turned in his chair, a sudden fear filling his eyes. He looked at Yager. "What the hell is this?"

"Damned if I know. What about it, Croft?"

"I have a little story to tell you boys," Cyrus said. "One time in Texas a bad bunch grabbed a rancher's kid and held him for ransom. There were four of them in on it, but only two did the grabbing. The other two were businessmen. That didn't come out until the law caught them and jailed them.

"The boy, fortunately, wasn't harmed, but it roused the townspeople just the same. They stormed the jail, and there were just too many of them. Some of those people had been frends with the businessmen, but that didn't make any difference. They knocked the law officers out, threw them in a cell, and took all four of those men and hanged them in the livery barn." He paused. "I know, I was the town marshal."

Yager stared. "What's this got to do—" he began.

"Look at him," Cyrus interrupted, and pointed contemptuously at Hunter, who had shrunk down in his chair, his face gray. "Look at him," Cyrus repeated, and then told Yager what had been done to Billy. Hunter made a weak gesture of protest.

"It was Durrant's idea. I was against it."

They heard a startled gasp. Myra, her face chalky, stood in the doorway, staring unbelievingly at Cyrus. His mouth hardened. "So you knew about Sundance. That was part of it, wasn't it?"

"What's this?" Yager said.

"Sundance was laying for me at the relay station, and Myra knew he'd be there." Cyrus paused, then added softly, "I killed him, Myra."

"I'm only sorry he didn't kill you," she said, and went to stand by her father. "Dad didn't know about it, so don't blame him."

Yager said, "I didn't know either, Cyrus, about Billy or any of it. It kind of puts a different slant on the sitaution."

"You're going to do something about it too," Cyrus said, "because if you don't, everyone in this town is going to learn what happened, and it'll be your neck." He paused. "You're going to arrest Durrant for kidnapping the boy."

Hunter said wildly, "But what about me and Myra?"

"What do you think?" Cyrus said. "Let's go, Yager."

When they got outside, the sheriff stopped

and said, "You mean you're really going to charge those two along with Durrant?"

"I want to see him in a cell first. We can talk about the rest later."

"Let me handle this, Cyrus. It's my job. I went along with him, yes. But he overstepped his boundaries, and he knew damned well that was something I wouldn't stand for." Yager walked away.

Cyrus followed slowly, thinking that if Hunter'd had any gumption he would have done something about their taking Billy. But he had probably been buffaloed by Myra and Durrant. The money he had invested in the cattle must have pulled him the wrong way, too. Cyrus wondered if he would really prefer charges against them. He certainly had the right; but he had thought a lot of them at one time, and that made a difference. One thing was certain: they wouldn't be welcome here after this. They'd certainly clear out of this town after this was over.

STOPPING across from the saloon, Cyrus heard Chuck calling his name. Chuck and the others came along the street, and then Cyrus saw Natalie in front of the hotel.

Yager came from the saloon and said, "Kate says Durrant rode out to Barb an hour ago. I'll get my horse."

"Hold it. I think this is a stall. Durrant wouldn't have gone out to Barb alone."

Cyrus palmed his gun and angled toward a narrow slot between the saloon and the next building, knowing Durrant kept his horses and buggy in his own stable across the alley. When he came out in the alley, he saw that the stable door was open. In almost that same moment he saw Myra and Kate on the saloon's second-floor landing.

Myra cried something in a shrill voice and spun inside as Cyrus ran forward, thinking automatically, she ran down the alley to warn him as soon as we left. He heard the nervous trample of hoofs, and was nearly even with the stable entrance when Durrant galloped outside, his body low in the saddle, a gun in his fist. He saw Cyrus, fired, and missed.

Cyrus jumped and fell as the horse came at him and then raced on past. Turning on his knees, he saw Durrant twist around in the saddle to fire again. Cyrus braced his gun wrist across his other arm, aimed carefully, and pulled the trigger. Durrant jarred upright and then fell backward from the saddle. Kate uttered a shriek, ran down the stairs, and flung herself across his body.

There was another shriek—of rage this time, not anguish. Cyrus looked up and saw Yager wrestling a rifle from Myra's hands. He holstered his own gun and turned wearily away as Natalie ran toward him. She flung herself into his arms, sobbing with relief.

"They took Billy last night. Durrant said that if I didn't do as he told me, he'd turn Sundance loose on Billy.

"I know," Cyrus said. "Billy's safe now."

They turned as Kate said brokenly, "He was only going away until he learned where he stood." She knelt beside Durrant, gently stroking the face, explaining brokenly to no one in particular, "He was only going away for a week or so. And he was going to send for me."

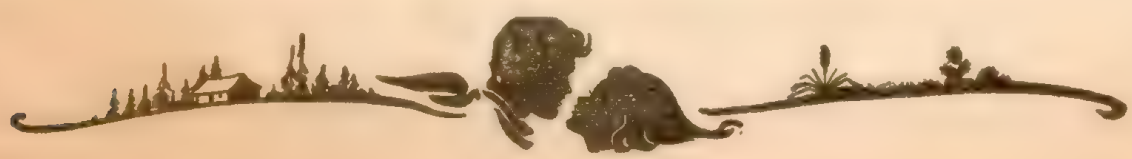
Yager came over gripping Myra's arm. Myra's face was cold and inscrutable. Men ran into the alley, and Hunter was there. He looked pleadingly at Cyrus. "I'm sorry," he said, and then put his arm around Myra.

Cyrus said to Yager, "Let 'em go. It's all forgotten, understand?" He looked at the sheriff meaningufully.

Yager said, "Cyrus, you're a white man." He released Myra.

Cyrus and Natalie turned away. Natalie murmured, "Kate's the only one I feel sorry for." And then she added, "Chuck told me that Billy is at the relay station. Let's go to him, Cyrus." She hesitated, her eyes brimming. "I think he'll need me."

"Yes," Cyrus said. "Let's go to him. Let's go find our son."



RIM OF THE

THEY NICKNAMED him "Quick" and it suited his fast-living, high-stepping ways . . . till the day he came up against a job too tough to be shrugged off with a smile

WEST

By STEVE SHANNON

AHEAD of him, below the crest of a rolling hill, Will Lane could see the crouching figures of Quick and Joe Bell in the ruddy sunlight. He looked north, where the wagon train had stoppel to camp along the Sweetwater, and hoped they would return with a load of fresh meat. There hadn't been a sign of game all that week.

He became aware that Joe Bell was running down the slope toward the wagon, and he looped the reins around the iron foot railing. His hands shook, and he felt keyed-up with excitement. It was a feeling that had come over him often since he and Quick had left Ohio, a feeling sparked by sudden bursts of elation whenever they went hunting with Joe Bell, or considered the possiblilty of an Indian attack.

His twenty-year-old face grew eager with anticipation as Bell came up and untied his sorrel from the back of the wagon. He swung into the saddle and jerked his head at Will. "There's a small herd of buffalo in yonder hollow. Get up there with Quick. I'm going to circle and get on their flank."

Will jumped down, grinning, and Joe Bell grinned back as though to say that he understood how the boy felt. Bell had hired on with the train as a hunter and scout, a tall sinewy man of around thirty, with a face that was weathered and granite hard; and though he was usually cold and sardonic in his ways, Will got along with him.

"Get going," Bell snapped, and started away from the wagon. Just then the crack of a shot came on the wind, and Bell swore. "The damn fool! I told him to hold his fire until I got set!" He heeled the sorrel into a hard gallop up the slope.

Will ran after with tense fury, his boots slipping on the wiry grass, and he was thinking, Damn that Quick! It's just like him to grab the reins and take over. And yet he found himself grinning as he ran, knowing his fury was not directed at Quick, but that it came out of the intensity of the moment.

He heard a distant rumble before the crest of the slope, and felt a tremor of disappointment at the thought that the herd was stampeding. There came to him the sound of a painful bellow, repeated over and over, as he saw Bell stop and speak to Quick. Bell disappeared on the down slope. When Will reached the crest, panting, he looked across the hollow and saw a huge buffalo on its haunches, its forefeet struggling to rise, the immense shaggy head straining forward with effort, bellowing.

Joe Bell galloped even with the beast and fired without breaking his horse's stride. The shaggy head sank down, and Bell raced on after the rest of the herd that was pounding up the far side of the hollow.

Will walked over to Quick, who was grinning wildly, his blond hair shining in the sun. "What did you want to go and shoot for?"

"Why the hell not?" Quick said, and went to pick up his hat.

"We could've got five or six of 'em if you hadn't scared 'em into running," Will said reasonably.

Quick turned on him in sudden fury. "Don't you ride me, too! Bell just got done jumping me, and I can only take so much!" Then he grinned again, the way he always did after an outburst. "Anyhow, Bell said a man could shoot right into a herd without their stampeding. Looks as if he was wrong."

It was like Quick to shift the blame, Will thought. He said, "Joe wasn't wrong. What he meant was, you have to drop your buff right where he's standing."

"I sure as hell dropped him."

"You broke his back. All that bellowing and kicking around is what spooked 'em."

Quick grinned. "Don't worry about it kid. We're not going to starve. Let's go down and take a look at him."

"I'd better start skinning him. Why don't you bring the wagon over?"

"Whatever you say, kid." Quick put his rifle across his shoulder and started off, singing, "It rained all day the night I left, the weather it was dry."

Will looked after him with faint irritation, thinking that "kid" business was getting on his nerves, since Quick was only twenty-two himself. Then he chuckled, knowing Quick just spoke out of habit. That's all it amounted to.

Will walked down to the dead buffalo, bled the carcass and started to skin it, thinking he would save a tenderloin for the Harlows. Jennie Harlow, who was making the trek to Oregon with her brother and sister-in-law, was partial to that cut, and he would surprise her. Will and Jennie were at the point where they were smiling at each other as if at a shared secret, and only last night they had sat on the riverbank for over an hour, talking.

He'd done most of the talking, Will remembered wryly. But for the first time in his life he'd had the feeling that he was really being understood. All that he remembered had poured out of him, and when he'd turned to his blankets he felt as though a dam had broken inside him, leaving him empty and light-headed and at peace.

"I don't remember my folks. They died of the fever when I was a baby, and the Markows sort of adopted me. They were our neighbors, and Quick is their son. We grew up like brothers."

"That isn't his real name, is it?"

Will chuckled. "Hardly. His name is Pete Markow. A teacher we once had nicknamed him 'Quick,' and it sort of stuck."

"Was this in Ohio?"

"That's right. I was born in Arkansas, but right after the Markows took me in they moved to Ohio."

"Tell me why that teacher happened to call him 'Quick.'"

"Well, this was at a little old country school. Pete was always getting into fights. He has a pretty bad temper, and you have to know how to handle him. One day the teacher said he had a quick temper. 'Quick,' he said, and that's how it started. The rest of the boys took it up, and it stuck."

"And what made you and Quick decide to go all the way to Oregon?"

WILL looked away, across the dark gleam of the river. This was something he could tell only in part, for he did not understand all the reasons himself. In his mind's eye he saw the Markows, an elderly couple, careworn and somehow haunted. He thought of the times he had caught them looking at him in a sad, sorrowful sort of way, as they might have looked at a man who was dying and didn't know it.

Even now, remembering this, Will felt an uncanny tremor run through him, and knew this was one of the reasons why he had wanted to leave. It wasn't that he hadn't felt at home with the Markows, or that they treated him badly; it had seemed to him at times that they favored him more than they did their own son, for they had little control over Quick. Restlessness marked Quick as he grew older; he was like a caged lion, violent and unpredictable, and Will knew in his heart that the Markows had not been sorry to see their son leave.

Out of an already shadowy past, so recent in time and yet so far away, Will could hear Markow's old man's voice saying, "You've been like a second son to us, but it's not likely that we'll be meeting again. Take care of yourself, boy. And, whatever happens don't let anything hurt you or turn you wild."

Will looked at Jennie, knowing he could not tell her any of this. But he could tell her of the nameless hunger and longing that had grown in him with the years, the need to break his bonds and seek his manhood, the feeling he'd had that unless he found his place in the world he would forever be lost in a whirl of uncertainty.

"Quick decided at the last minute to come with me. We didn't have much money, and most of what we had was gone by the time we reached Independence. We figured we'd have to get work somewhere and earn our passage money. But then we heard about Latham, and the two wagonloads of supplies he wanted delivered at his brother's store in Oregon City, so we talked to him and got the job."

"Do you mean to stake a claim and farm it when you reach Oregon, Will?"

"Sure. Farming's all Quick and I know anything about. Mr. Markow had a farm. I reckon they've sold it by now and moved to town, though." He paused. "It wasn't much of a place anyhow. Poor land."

"Will Quick mind farming for a living?"

"On his own land? Of course he won't mind. When a man gets his own land, it means a heap more than it means to work another man's land, even your father's."

She murmured, "You admire Quick, don't you?"

"I don't know that 'admire' is the right word," Will said. "I guess I feel about him as I would about a brother, if I had a real one."

"He's not like you at all. And the two of you together aren't anything like—well, the Ballard brothers, for instance."

Will made a sound of disgust. "I hope not." They were big, bearded men, the Ballard brothers, and there was an air about them that was both vicious and secretive. Their gambling and drinking had already earned them a bad name among the emigrants, and Will knew that McCloud, the train captain, was keeping a wary eye on them. "There are bad apples in every barrel," Will said.

Will wondered uneasily if she had mentioned the Ballard brothers because Quick had been spending most of his evenings at their wagon. Not that it meant anything; several of the single men did the same thing. A man like Quick needed a little diversion after a long and monotonous day of travel at a snail's pace. He'd be all right once they reached Oregon.

There he came. Will went over and got a saw from the wagon bed. He had already slit the buffalo's tough hide from the throat to the buttocks, and had skinned out the legs. Now he sawed through the heavy neck bones, leaving the hide intact. Quick stood by and watched.

When Will looked up Quick said, "Here comes Bell."

Bell rode up to them. "If you're ready, lets get at it. I got two more buffalo on the other side of that hill."

"I'm ready," Will said.

He caught the end of the rope Bell tossed him, and tied it fast around the shaggy head. Bell looped his end around the saddle horn and urged his sorrel forward; the hide peeled from the carcass and lay like a bloody blanket in the dirt.

"Like skinning a rabbit!" Quick said.

Joe Bell gave him a speculative look. He said in a flat voice, "You've hunted with me for the last time sonny. Now get the butchering while Will and I skin the other two."

Quick's eyes flickered dangerously, and the grin tightened on his face. "I don't need you to go along when I'm hunting," he said, and took a shaky breath. He added almost in a whisper, "And don't be telling me what to do or I'll make it rough on you."

There was a paused moment of silence, during which Joe Bell studied Quick carefully. Then he made a dry sound of amusement. He said mildly, "You're not quite up to it, Quick."

"How's that?" It came out a flat challange.

"Bluffing me," Bell murmured, and turned his horse and relooped his rope, obviously through with Quick. "Mount up," he told Will. Will swung up behind the cantle.

As they loped across the hollow Will felt the need to say something. He tried to make it casual. "That Quick," he said with a short laugh. "He's kind of touchy. He's all right, though."

Joe Bell grunted.

"He's all right," Will repeated. He's full of vinegar, that's all."

"This is Injun country, so keep your eyes peeled," Bell said curtly.

Will held his silence after that, hoping this was the end of it. He thought a lot of both men, and the last thing he wanted was to see them tangle.

THE sun was down when they came in sight of the circled wagons. Mules, oxen and a few horses and cows grazed along the river under the watchful eyes of mounted men; at dark the animals would be pegged inside the camp circle. Boys were out gathering buffalo chips; women moved around cooking fires. Quick jumped down without a word when they reached the camp, and Will drove on and turned the loaded wagon over to McCloud, who regarded the meat with approval.

"We can sure use it," he said.

Will had wrapped a tenderloin in a piece of cloth. "I want to save this for Mrs. Harlow. Remember that when you divide the rest of it."

Mrs. Harlow and Jennie were making biscuits when Will came up. "Brought you some meat," he said.

They were delighted when they saw the tenderloin. Jennie said, "Stay and have supper with us, Will." She was a slender blonde girl of eighteen, and to Will she was like a fairy princess.

"I'll wash up and change my shirt," Will said.

He often ate with the Harlows. He liked sitting there in the evenings, watching the flicker of firelight against the wagon hoods. Voices would murmur in the surrounding darkness, and here and there someone would be strumming a banjo. Will would dream of the future, feeling that all the dreams were bound to come true. Then he would look up and find Jennie watching him, and see her slow and wonderous smile.

Will crossed the circle toward the two wagons that were under his and Quick's care. They were big Conestogas, with heavy wheels that reached to Will's shoulder; they were loaded with merchandise and supplies—barrels of flour, bags of coarse salt and sugar, kegs of nails, and boxes containing hammers and hatchets and axes and pick heads.

There were bales of cotton goods, too, as well as smaller boxes of thread and needles and pins. "These are hard-to-come-by goods in Oregon," Latham had said. When Will had first seen all of it stacked in an Independence warehouse, he'd thought that they would never be able to pack it in just two wagons.

As Will came up, he saw Quick and Silas Ballard standing at the head of the first wagon. Jake wormed from under the hood and jumped down, grinning. Will stared at him.

"What're you doing in there?" he said angrily.

"Jake was wondering what all we carried, so I told him to go ahead and take a look," Quick said.

Jake said, "Looks as if you have a couple of boxes of rifles and one of handguns. Do you have ammunition for 'em?"

"What if we have?" Will said. "You have no call looking through that stuff."

"Maybe he's afraid you stole something, Jake," said Silas.

They studied him with open belligerance and a touch of wariness.

"Will didn't mean anything," Quick said. "He's just bound to keep worrying about all that stuff. You'd think it was his, the way he worries."

"It doesn't worry us," Silas said, and spat. "See you later, Quick. Let's go, Jake."

They walked away. Will got a towel from the second wagon. Quick was still standing there when he came back, and Will told him he was going to eat with the Harlows.

"Why did you look through the wagons?"

"I didn't hurt anything."

"Well, it's not right. Even if it was our own stuff I wouldn't like it."

"It won't happen again," Quick said. And then he added, "Say, Will, how much money do you have left?"

"About forty dollars. Why?"

"Let me have five," Quick said.

Will stared. "Did you lose the thirty you had when we started on this trek? Did you lose all of it already?"

"Hell, thirty dollars isn't much," Quick said.

"Well, I don't know," Will said. "We're going to need every dime we have when we get to Oregon. We're not getting any cash for hauling this stuff, you know. We're lucky to get our grub out of it."

A little smile gathered around Quick's mouth, but his eyes were cold. "You mean you're not going to let me have the five?"

"Dammit, Quick, I told you—"

"I could tell you something, too," Quick said softly.

"What's that?" Will said.

"Nothing." Quick grinned slyly. "Are you going to let me have that money?"

Will sighed. "Well, you know where it is—in that little buckskin purse in my gear."

Quick's grin was pleased as he turned away, but Will was disturbed as he walked down to the river. For the first time it came to him that his friend was going through a slow process of change. He tried to think back and recapture the Quick of old, and when he did

he found no slyness there. Temper and sudden bursts of violence, yes, but no slyness. It was disconcerting, to say the least.

FOLLOWING the Sweetwater, they got to South Pass, then took the Lander cutoff to Fort Hall, where they stopped long enough to overhaul their wagons and rest their stock. Three days later they set out along the Snake, stopped again at Fort Boise, and then the Blue Mountains rose before them. The sun had hammered them for weeks on end, but first there was rain and sleet, and then there was snow.

They inched up the rugged mountain slopes, and their stock suffered under the punishment. Oxen weakened and died for lack of feed, and those who owned them wished they had bought mules instead. People lightened their wagons. They dumped cherished possessions beside the trail—bureaus and cherrywood beds and oak tables and chairs. Women wept as they left these possessions behind

They checked their larders and knew fear. And sometimes an ox would be butchered, or a man would open a sack of wheat that he had meant to use for seed, and in a matter of days the sack would be empty, but the people did not thrive on the boiled wheat.

The men grew sullen and were gruff with their families, and the children did not shout and play any more. The women were silent and watched their men with strained faces, and there were some who wished they had turned back at one of the forts. They longed for the security they had left behind, and they feared what lay ahead. Joe Bell regarded their attitude contemptuously.

"The only reason most of 'em came is that they never had anything to begin with. But to hear 'em talk, they all had prosperous farms."

"Are you going to settle in Oregon?" Will asked.

"Damned if I know," Bell said irritably. "Are you?"

"Sure." Will grinned. "I'm hoping Quick and I'll have a prosperous farm one of these days."

"That boy'll never be a farmer," Bell said sarcastically. "If you do team up you'll end by doing all the work."

Resentment worked in Will. He'd known Quick a damned sight longer than he had Bell. "That's not true."

"Forget it," Bell said curtly, and walked away.

But Will was worried. Quick was down in the dumps for sure, sulky and touchy as all get-out. He went for days without speaking to Will, and he spent all his evenings at the Ballard brothers' wagon. He had gotten drunk half a dozen times on their raw whisky, of which they seemed to have no end. One midnight Will had found him sleeping, fully clothed in the rain. He had lifted Quick to his feet.

"Come on, man! You're going to get sick out here."

Quick had swung at him drunkenly, muttering threats, and Will had been forced to knock him out in order to handle him at all. The next morning Quick had grinned sheepishly when he saw his muddy clothes.

CACTUS CASANOVA

By Limerick Luke

A long legged cowboy called Shorty
Was really rampageous and snorty.
He never did wed,
But the gals he misled
Would number somewhere around forty!

"Look at them! What the hell happened?"

"I guess you took on too much whisky."

"I reckon so." Quick rubbed his swollen jaw. "Must've run into something, too. I can't even remember undressing and crawling into my blankets."

Will thought of giving Quick a piece of his mind, but decided against it, knowing it wouldn't solve anything. Anyhow, it was over and done with, and when they got to Oregon things would be different.

They reached The Dalles, and here the train stopped as a unit for the last time. Some of the emigrants would travel on to Portland, while others would disappear into the wilderness and find their way to the settlements scattered along the numerous creeks southward. The Harlows planed to stay in The Dalles until Henry Harlow settled on where he would erect his lumber mill.

"My macherinery isn't due for another month," he told Will, "but that suits me fine. It'll give me time to look around and get straightened out. They'll be wanting board houses, and they'll need lumber for furniture and such." He sighed. "A man dreams. I've been dreaming that maybe in time I can start up a regular furniture factory."

"There's no reason why not."

Henry Harlow was a calm man with ruddy cheeks. He said, "I like the way you take hold, Will. If you ever decide against farming, come in with me. Maybe we'll both end up rich."

"I reckon I'll stick to farming," Will told him.

Later, he browsed through several stores, for it was in him to buy the Harlows a little something. He fingered a pipe that Henry would like, and a comb-and-brush set for Mrs. Harlow. When he saw the gold heart-shaped locket on its thin chain, he glowed with pleasure, knowing it was just right for Jennie.

He wished he had a tintype of himself to put inside, and then guessed it was an unseemly wish. A girl didn't carry a man's picture around in a locket unless she was bespoken to him, and it might be years before he could even begin to think about such a thing as marriage.

He would buy her the locket, though, he decided, and hurried back to the wagons. He ran into Henry and Joe Bell on the way, but passed them with a wave of his hand. Quick was getting slicked up when Will came up to the wagons.

He grinned and said, "Big time tonight, kid! I'm ready to howl!"

"Take it easy. We want to get an early start in the morning."

"Sure."

WILL climbed into the wagon and opened the box that held his gear. He dug down and found his buckskin purse. It was empty. His mouth dropped open and he stared. Then he jumped from the wagon, raging.

"What happened to my money?"

Quick's eyes narrowed in a scowl. "What about your money?"

"You know damned well! Why'd you have to take it all?"

Quick said sullenly, "I asked you, and you said I could."

"Only the five dollars, that one time. You never asked again."

"I didn't figure I had to. Haven't we always shared alike?"

"What was mine, sure. But never what was yours."

"Don't worry about it, kid. I'll make it up to you."

"Don't call me 'kid!' " Will shouted.

"I'll call you any damn thing I like," Quick answered softly.

There was something in his face that Will had never seen before. Contempt was part of it, but there was a knowing glitter in his eyes that Will couldn't understand.

He said, wanting to be reasonable, "Listen, Quick. You've pretty well done as you pleased, and now you have to buckle down and face things. We have a lot ahead of us, and if we're going to work together we have got to work as a team. That means you have to pull your share of the load, and you haven't been doing that."

A baffled and somehow lost expression moved painfully across Quick's face. Then it was gone, and he said sullenly, "I don't know that I want to stay around here, anyhow."

"What's that?"

"I've been talking to the Ballard boys

about California. They claim it's quite a place. Folks are still hunting gold there, and a man can dig up more in a week than he can make in a year farming."

"Oh, stop it," Will said disgustedly. "That was years ago, when we were kids. This is the country for us. You and I can farm with the best of 'em if we settle down to it."

Quick shrugged. "We'll see," he said, and walked away. Will turned dejectedly to Harlow's wagon, feeling that the bottom had dropped out of everything.

Will went walking with Jennie after supper, and she said, "So you'll be going to Oregon City in the morning. How far is it, Will?"

"Oh, maybe around a hundred miles or so."

"Will you be coming back here?"

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, "I want to. There's land to be had on Beaver Creek, south of here. I heard about it in town. It sounds like a fine place."

"You and Quick?"

"Sure."

"I wondered, because I heard you shout at him just before you came."

"That was nothing, just a little quarrel."

They strolled through the darkness, seeing the lights of town in the distance. Will felt torn inside, and when Jennie slipped her hand into his he pressed it hard.

"Joe Bell is going into business with Henry," she said finally.

"They'll do well together. Joe's a good man."

They walked on for a while and then turned back. Before they reached the wagons, Jennie stopped. She said softly, "I keep thinking that we won't be seeing each other again, so I'd like you to kiss me, Will."

He felt his blood mount, and was glad of the darkness. His arms went around her awkwardly. Her lips were soft as rose petals. He heard her say, "I'll miss you, Will."

"Maybe I'll be back."

"I hope so. I hope so with all my heart."

Will said good-bye to the Harlows and to Joe Bell, who was talking business with Henry. When he rolled up in his blankets that night he felt as though he were leaving the only real family he had ever known.

They got an early start in the morning. Will, driving the lead wagon, waved a final good-bye to Jennie and the Harlows and Joe Bell, who was saddling his horse.

Behind Will, Quick sat bent over on the high seat of his wagon nursing a hangover. Will guessed he would be all right, though. Quick hadn't spoken more than two words while they hitched the teams, and he hadn't looked at Will once, but he'd rolled out of his blankets without being told.

They stopped at noon to feed and rest their teams. This was timber country, with the sky cloudy overhead. But there was a road, even if it was rutted and muddy from the recent rains, and they made better time than they had on the prairie.

"We ought to make it in four or five days at the least," Will told Quick that evening.

Quick grunted. "Have you been thinking at all about going to California?"

"No," Will said, wishing Quick would forget California. "Anyhow, we're flat broke. Do you expect to walk all the way there and live on grass?"

"Maybe we could get hold of some money."

"How? The way we stand now, we have to hire out to earn some cash to buy farm tools before we can get started on our own place. Anyhow, even if I could I wouldn't go to California."

"Why not?" Quick demanded.

"Because I want to stay around here," Will said vaguely.

Quick looked at him. "It's because of that Jennie!" he burst out. "Isn't that so? Hell, man, you're crazy. I saw better pieces of fluff in town last night."

RAGE broke in Will. He realized for the time that Quick had no depth to him, that he was all on the surface, and that all his life he had been swayed this way and that by one desire or another. And he understood at last that Quick's outbursts of temper had never been based on honest indignation and anger, but had been used to hide his own doubts from himself.

Will scarcely realized that he had stepped up to Quick. He said softly, "Take that back about Jennie."

He expected to face sudden violence, but a strange thing happened. Quick's eyes narrowed and hooded over, and a sly little smile

tugged at his lips. "I take it back," he said.

Will turned away, sick at heart, knowing the damage had been done, and that whatever they'd felt for each other was gone. He knew, too, that from now on he would never accept Quick as a partner.

When they stopped to camp the second evening, Will figured they were halfway to their destination. They had passed no settlements along this stretch, though twice they had met wagons coming from the opposite direction. It was a lonely stretch of road.

Will was slicing from a venison roast when he heard the sound of hoofs. Quick moved past him, and then Will straightened as two horsemen appeared in the flickering firelight. The second he recognized the Ballard brothers, he knew that something was wrong. He looked at Quick and saw the gun in his hand.

Jake Ballard chuckled. "Howdy Will." Then he asked, "What's the answer, Quick?"

"I tried him out, but it won't work," Quick said. "He has that skinny Harlow gal on his mind."

"Then I guess this is where we leave him," Silas said, and both brothers swung down and walked forward. "Do you want to take him, Quick?"

"Take him?" Quick looked back at Will. "You can still come in with us." He was almost pleading. "Listen. What's in those wagons is worth plenty, especially with winter coming on. We can take that stuff and sell it in any of a dozen settlements, and get big money. We can be halfway to California before Latham's brother gets wind of it." He stopped, his face eager with pleading.

"Good heavens," Will said, "is that you talking?"

"Damn it, it's better'n starving this winter! And that's about what we'll end up doing."

"I'd rather starve than take what doesn't belong to me," Will said.

Quick took a shaky breath, and anger rose to his face. His voice was gritty when he said, "Damn high and mighty, aren't you? Always nosing around getting in good with folks. My folks, too, damn you!"

"Quick, stop it!"

"Sure," Quick said softly. They were facing each other now, and the Ballard brothers were behind Will. "Sure," Quick repeated, "I'll stop it, kid. But not before I tell you something you ought to know."

Will wet his lips. "What's that?"

"The folks didn't think I knew, but I heard 'em talking one night about your family, about how your mother died when you were born, and how your old man brought you to our place. It seems he was damn near crazy, and ended up in town drunker'n a hootowl. He was still drunk when he come to fetch you. He wanted to kill you on acount of your mother dying. Pa tried to stop him. Both my mother and father tried but your old man was crazy mad!"

Quick was shouting now. "So my father killed your father! He had to! That's why we moved to Ohio, so you wouldn't find out! That's why Pa was always going around sad-faced, like he'd had the stuffings licked out of him!"

Will had listened, frozen inside. It was as though only part of him listened, so that he didn't feel anything, only a kind of wonder. And he understood, then, the sad sorrowful looks the Markows had given him at times, and why they had treated him in that almost apologetic way. Now he knew. And then he started to thaw inside, and it hit him.

He said in a broken voice, "Why did you hurt me with that?"

"Damn you!" Quick shouted, and tears sprang to his eyes. "Damn you!" Then there was silence.

"All right, all right," Slias said irritably. "You've had your say, and now we have to get these wagons moving." He paused. "Are you going to take him, or do I have to do it?"

"What do you mean, take him?" Quick said.

"We're not leaving him here, not by a damn sight."

"The hell we're not. We'll give him some grub and he can walk back."

Jake said, "Silas and I don't want him where he can talk. We've figured it out good. We're not going to be wearing these beards when we peddle this stuff, and we're going to use different names."

Silas said, "Step aside, Quick."

Shock and horror broke across Quick's face. "No you don't. That wasn't in the plan. You're not shooting him!"

THE instant Quick had finished speaking, Will heard a gun cock at his back, and flung himself under the wagon. Two guns roared, sounding like one. As Will twisted desperately, he had a picture of Quick's face down in the road, and of Silas buckling at the knees and pitching forward.

Then Jake swung his gun on Will, and there was a flash in the dark as another gun spoke. Jake, an astonished expression on his face, clawed at his chest and fell within three feet of his brother. Will got up and ran to Quick, sobs choking his throat.

"Quick!" He turned his friend. "Quick!"

Quick's eyes blinked open, and he grinned. "I've been a fool. I didn't want them to shoot you. I'm glad they didn't."

Will checked the wound hastily. It was high in the side. "You're going to be all right."

"I hope so," Quick muttered. "I have to set things straight." Then he sighed and closed his eyes.

Will saw with relief that he was still breathing. He became aware that someone was standing next to him. It was Joe Bell. Bell gave him a mocking grin. "Is Quick going to be all right?"

"If we fix him up and get him to Oregon City and a doctor," Will said automatically. Then he added, "How did you get here?"

Bell gestured at the bodies of the Ballard brothers with his rifle. "They sold their rigs for next to nothing yesterday and bought some horses. Then they headed out about an hour before you and Quick left camp. It got me curious, especially after I saw all three of them with their heads together in a saloon. So I kind of tagged along."

Will swallowed. "Did you hear what Quick said about my father?"

Bell nodded. "That's what held me up, listening to him. I didn't figure they would shoot you right away." He paused. "I wouldn't put too much stock in what he said, though."

"But it's true. He wouldn't have lied at a time like that."

"All right, so it's true. What about it? Who are you to say what eats a man's insides out? Maybe it'll happen to you someday; you can't tell. A man hears something like that and says to himself that he'd never do such a thing, but he doesn't know. Bad luck happens to a man, and sometimes he breaks. That's all. Come on, let's get Quick in the wagon and see what we can do to stop his bleeding."

The winter passed and it was spring again, and a line of eastbound wagons were parked on the flats outside of The Dalles. Quick gripped Will's hand. "I'll be back, Will. You can bet on that. But first I have to make things right with my folks. When I leave 'em next time I don't want them to be relieved about it."

"Tell them I think of them."

Quick grinned at Jennie. "I'll tell 'em you got hitched, too, and that you'll be breaking your own ground this year. Who knows, maybe I'll bring 'em back with me next spring. Well, they're ready to roll."

He walked away and turned once to wave, then climbed to the seat of a wagon and picked up the lines. Will and Jennie watched until the train was out of sight. Then they moved away, into all their tomorrows.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

In The Next Issue

A Roundup of Western Movies by BOB CUMMINGS

Featuring a Review of RKO's

RUN OF THE ARROW

Starring ROD STEIGER and SARITA MONTIEL

PLUS a word-and-picture personality sketch of

FRED MacMURRAY

Suspicion

By STEPHEN PAYNE

FINDING THE RIGHT trail was easy . . . the trouble began when I tried to make it point in the wrong direction

WHEN Buck Holmes rode to my cabin, half a mile east of Long Butte, and shouted, "Sturgis Caseman's bank's been robbed, Jeff! Sheriff Ivers wants you to cut for sign," a picture of Jessie Newberry flashed into my mind. Jessie had said she'd rob Caseman, and fear that she had at last done it tied a knot in my stomach.

Buck was saying, "Ivers tells me that you were once an Army scout, later a detective for the Cattlemen's Association, and that even nowadays you're always being called by lawmen to help them track crooks. Right?"

"You'd hunt Kelly down as if he were a coyote!" Jessie said angrily.

"I do sort of keep my hand in," I said.

"The cowmen say you're known as 'the lean old gray wolf who always gets his man,'" Buck resumed. "And darned if you don't look like an old gray wolf!"

"I'm kind of proud of it," I said, sizing up Buck in turn. He was husky as an army mule, blond, blue-eyed, with a strong face, big calloused hands, and big feet which he had crowded into cowboy boots.

It was second nature with me to notice people's boots, particularly the soles and heels. I recalled that when Buck Holmes had come to Long Butte, four months ago, he'd wanted to become a cowman and rancher. But it seemed he had no money to invest, for he'd taken odd jobs in town. He had made a right good impression on folks, though.

"My own horses are out at the Meldrum ranch," I said. "Will you give me a lift to town?"

"Sure. Let's go," Buck said impatiently.

"In a jiffy," I said, turning back into my cabin to pick up my six-shooter, a pair of calipers, a magnifying glass, and a half-pint of whisky. Whisky is potent medicine for a bullet-nicked crook, and will often induce a dying man to confess.

A minute later, Buck's horse was moving townward, and also toward the rough, wooded foothills reaching back to the high Rockies on the western skyline. The fresh light green of newly leafed aspens stood out against the darker green of pines, and the early sunlight of this June morning was lifting mists out of the gulches and canyons. It's right pretty, I thought, for this was my country. I loved it, and I loved some of the people who lived here.

Buck's voice interrupted my thoughts. "I've always heard that a bank robbery in any Western town was a wild, exciting event—outlaws dashing in to grab the loot, then whooping out of town with six-shooters popping. But on this job nobody saw or heard the thieves. Sturgis Caseman went to his bank quite early, saw an open window, and then discovered his safe had been looted. There were no clues at all. When I offered to help, Ivers sent me to get you, Jeff."

"Are there any suspects?" I asked.

"Too many! Ivers said he can name twenty men and women who hate Caseman for encouraging them to get in debt to him and then having to let him take over their ranches or other property—like he did to the Newberrys."

Buck's voice was taut, but I didn't answer, for Jessie Newberry was again uppermost in my mind. Seventeen years ago I'd visited the Snaffle Bit ranch and met a lively three-year-old redhead named Jessie, so cute and engaging she had warmed my heart. In those days Frank and Irene Newberry were building up a small cow outfit the slow and hard, but sure, way. By the time Jessie was ten, she was helping too. She rode like a young buck Indian, bareback and lickety-split, always frisky and gay, except when she got mad. Then what a temper she had!

Before I realized it, Jessie was grown up, and I came home from a long trip to find the Newberrys building a new house in Long Butte. I was more than amazed, I was downright worried, when I learned that Frank, who had earlier mortgaged his ranch to Caseman so he could stock it with cattle, was now borrowing from Caseman's bank to finance this fifteen-thousand-dollar project. Irene wanted it, Frank told me, and he'd go all out to satisfy her yen to be something more than a ranchman's wife.

I reckon Irene was happy for the short time the family lived in this mansion, for she really cut a swath. Then the lightning struck.

IT WASN'T by chance that I rode to the house that day to see if I could do anything to help Jessie. Caseman, an attorney, and the Newberry family, were all in the living room. But Jessie rushed out to meet me. This brief spell of soft living hadn't improved Jessie's appearance. You can't improve a wild rose! A lovely redhead, she was as trim and quick as an antelope, but so plain mad she could hardly speak.

"Jeff, you must help us!" she greeted me. "That—that Caseman says we have to get out of this house, the house Mother wanted so badly. We'll lose the Snaffle Bit ranch and our cattle, too. Tell him he can't do this to us." She put her fingers in my horse's mane and twisted hard, looking up hopefully into my troubled face.

"According to the law, he can. He gave you

legal notice of foreclosure of his mortgage. Now the time's run out, so get hold of yourself and make the best of it."

"Make the best of a tricky swindle? Caseman has gypped Dad out of at least ten thousand dollars."

"There's no proof of that," I said, feeling that she had to get through her head the grim truth of their predicament.

"Well, darn it, if the man had given us more time and stopped demanding his twelve per cent interest, we could have paid him, over a number of years."

"No, Jessie. You're too deep in the hole ever to pull out."

"You just don't understand what this grand home means to Mother! It means so much that if Caseman does throw us out I'll rob his darned bank. I may shoot him, too. But you're siding with that swindler. Good-bye, Jeff." She ran to the house.

That "good-bye" sounded final, but I knew the family had no place to go, so I rode to see Pete Bronson. Pete had a homestead he called the J H Ranch, on Long Butte Creek two and a half miles southwest of town, which he wanted to sell.

I gave him two hundred bucks for it, with the understanding that he'd accept Frank Newberry's note for fifty dollars, giving Frank title to this claim. The deal worked out, and the Newberrys moved to the J H with one wagon and team, Jessie's best saddle pony, four milk cows, and a few items of furniture. This was late in November.

While I hadn't been too disturbed by Jessie's wild talk, I was worried when Ole Anderson, who was now the Newberrys' closest neighbor, told Sheriff Ivers, "I've seen this bandit Scar Kelly come sneaking to the J H and then riding in moonlight with Jessie."

I'd known Kelly before he went haywire. He was a good-looking, devil-may-care young buck who'd fascinate almost any girl. Kelly'd get a kick out of robbing Sturgis Caseman—if Jessie wanted him to do it for her! To my relief, Ivers got a posse together and succeeded in running Kelly out of our country.

Early in December, when I went to the J H with the carcass of a big buck deer on my pack horse, I was shocked by the change in the Newberrys. Irene had become almost a bed-ridden burden, due to shock and humiliation, she said. Frank called himself a "down an' outer," and wouldn't work.

I got hot under the collar and told all of them how the ranch could be built up and made to pay, if they'd pitch in and hustle. But Frank growled, "I made one ranch, only to have it stolen from me. I've shot my wad."

Hoping to pep up Jessie, I made free with advice. But she snapped, "Don't tell me to stop feeling put-on and sorry for myself. This didn't happen to you, Jeff. How can I make a fresh start—unless I make a stake by robbing the crook who robbed us?"

It seemed as if all I could do was worry. But in March Jessie came to town for the St. Patrick's Day dance and met a newcomer, Buck Holmes. Buck took a great shine to the pretty redhead who carried herself so proudly and defiantly and had so little to say to anybody.

Later I heard that Buck was riding out to the J H every week, and I thought, good! But a dismal thought followed: as soon as he realizes what the man who marries Jessie'll be up against, he'll lose interest like all the rest of her one-time admirers.

MY MIND returned to the immediate present as I heard Buck Holmes ask, "Jeff, is Sturgis Caseman crooked?"

"Who told you he was crooked?"

"Jessie's father, for one. Frank swears that there were at least eight promissory notes, totaling about ten thousand dollars, that he had no recollection of signing."

"I know it," I said shortly. "But Frank's method of borrowing from Caseman was to go to the bank and say, 'Sturg, I need another hunk of cash.' Caseman would make out a new Promissory note; Frank would sign it and pocket another thousand bucks or so. He'd then pay it out to contractors, without getting receipts. I say Frank simply lost track of how many notes he did sign."

Buck said, "I suppose that's possible. But is Irene bitter! That woman keeps her hurt, humiliation, and shock bottled inside her; but it explodes once in a while. She told me that you, Jeff Murdock, sided with Caseman all the way."

If Buck expected a sharp denial, I disap-

pointed him. We rode on toward the bank, where Sheriff Ivers and Sturgis Caseman met us.

"Am I glad to see you, Jeff," the banker said. "I don't usually keep much cash on hand, but they got away with ten thousand dollars!"

I said, "I once told you to buy a modern safe, but you were too stingy to do it."

"That's a foolish economy I now thoroughly regret," the dejected banker replied.

Sheriff Ivers asked, "Jeff, how the hell does a lawman go about trailing a thief when he has no place to start?"

"Give me a free hand," I said. "Not that I promise a darned thing. Sheriff, if I should need a horse, may I borrow one of yours?"

Ivers was a horse fancier, and kept six good nags in a corral behind the jail. "Help yourself, Jeff. I'll be organizing a posse."

Buck Holmes gave me a close look. "I'd like to see how you go about cutting for sign, Jeff."

"Later, Buck. Right now I'll play a lone hand."

There was no use scouting the bank, for the curious mob had trampled every inch of floor space, and of ground and sidewalk. So I walked to Sheriff Ivers's corral. Inside it were a feed crib, a barn, and six horses. As I ran my eyes over the horses I noticed something no one who was not an expert tracker would have seen.

The sheriff's bay pony, Chico, had been used during the night. The appearance of his hoofs, legs and the under side of his belly told me Chico had waded in water for several hours. Although the horse had rolled in the dust not long since, I could also tell from small crinkled places in the hair on its back and sides that it had been ridden bareback.

My nostrils dilated like those of a bird dog on a hot scent, and I felt old familiar tingles of excitement. Then I lifted each of Chico's feet and observed the tracks the unshod hoofs had made in the soft corral dirt. Satisfied that I could identify those prints wherever I'd see them, I prowled the stable and found a bridle, the headstall still damp with sweat and the reins damp from water.

Finally I went to Ivers's quarters to see if I'd find any wet shoes or clothes. No wet footwear or trousers came to light. At the corral gate were a maze of horse tracks, for the sheriff habitually let his horses out each morning to go to Long Butte Creek to water. He had taken care of that chore this morning, and the many hoof prints had blotted out those which Chico must have left earlier.

I had intended to explore Long Butte Creek, flowing north at the east edge of town, as my first step in cutting for sign, and I now had a sound reason for doing it. The old ruse of attempting to hide a trail in running water has many drawbacks, such as places where a man or a horse must either climb over some obstruction or go around it.

Always there are places, too, where either a man or a horse is sure to step on a sand bar, a soddy spot, an almost dry rocky spot, or into a muddy place in the stream's bed. At night a horseman isn't going to notice these missteps.

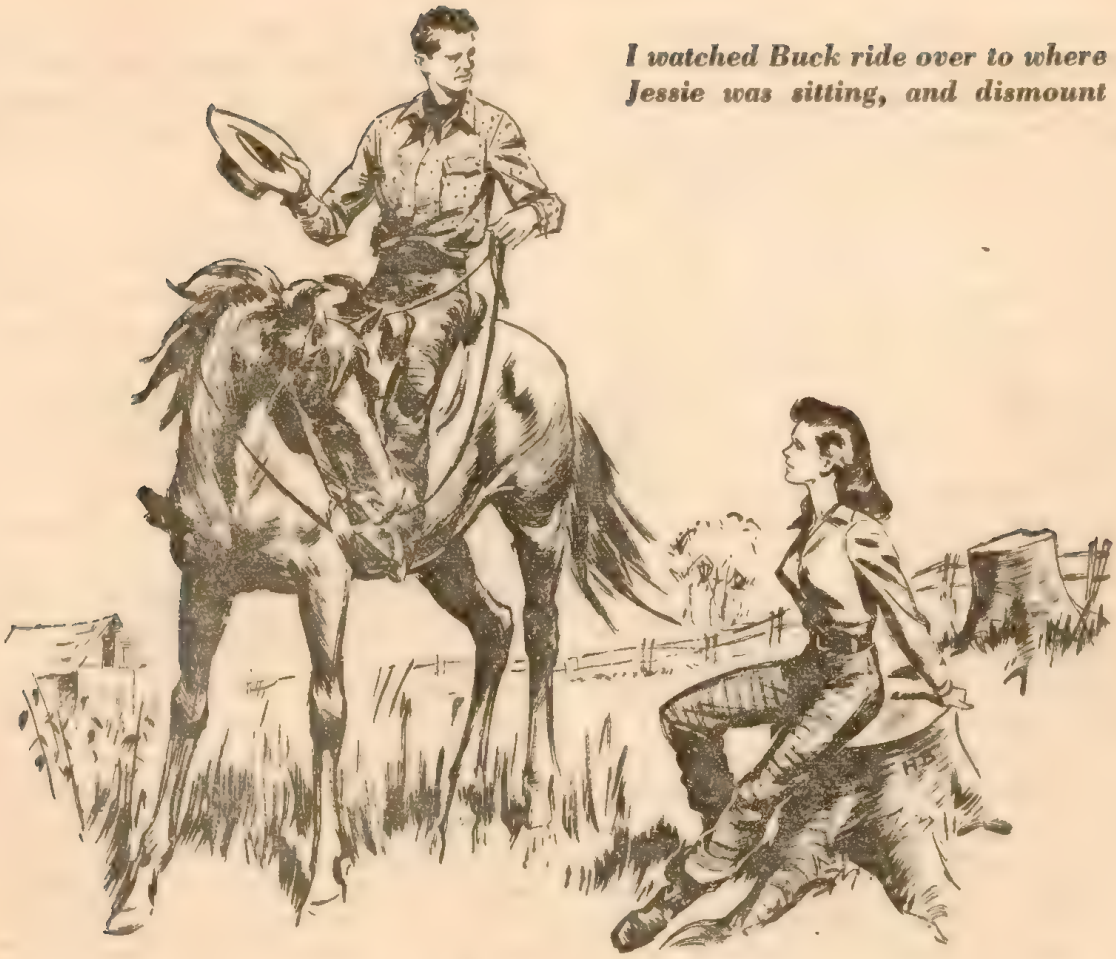
WHOEVER had ridden Chico did not want his trail found. But I soon learned he had followed the creek upstream, south from town, and had returned by the same route. Tramping on, I felt momentary relief when I saw that he had ridden past the J H Ranch, where the creek ran in a deep valley, and had gone onward for another half mile, as far as Ole Anderson's ranch. Here he had turned around and started back.

Anderson and his wife were solid, reliable folks. I couldn't figure either of them as doing anything dishonest. But I scouted for half an hour before I was satisfied no one had met the rider here. Nor had he dismounted.

"Maybe the fellow came on past the J H on purpose to throw me off," I grumbled to myself. "Yeah, it seems as if he knew I'd be roped in, and feared I'd find his trail in spite of all he could do to hide it."

Back downstream I went, and at a point where a big yellow pine towered above scrubby willows and alders I began scouting the creek banks. I was now about a hundred yards northeast of the J H buildings, and out of sight of them.

A woodpecker hole in the yellow pine caught my attention, and, thinking that the rider might have left something there, I shoved my hand into it. It was empty. But searching



I watched Buck ride over to where Jessie was sitting, and dismount

the creek bank on the side nearest to the J H buildings brought results that tightened my throat and made me swear.

Footprints which someone had attempted to smooth over with a willow branch had not been quite obliterated. They were the prints of small shoes, a woman's shoes. She had stood tiptoe on the bank of the stream and leaned out as if to take a package from the rider! The purpose of his secret trip was now clear.

I was stooped over, mentally photographing the footprints, when Jessie Newberry's voice sent a shock through me. "Why, hello, Jeff! What do you think you're doing?"

I straightened up and looked at the girl as she came walking down the slope. Heavy work shoes, overalls, and a blue jumper could not hide her feminine charm, and even though I was sixty-odd, her figure held my attention.

Forcing a grin, I said, "Hello yourself, Jessie. It's good to see you."

"And it's nice to see you, Jeff," the girl replied, smiling, "when I never see anybody any more. It looks as if you're afoot. Are you fishing? Where's your rod and bait?"

"Not fishing, Jessie." (Is she cool! I thought. Women can be like that, hiding what they really feel lots better than men do.) "Yes, I'm afoot, and I'm up to my old tricks—cutting for sign."

This should have brought fear into Jessie's bright eyes. But she laughed and said, "It seems I've heard that Jeff Murdock is the best tracker in all the Rocky Mountain west." Her tone was light. She was actually razzing me. "Who're you after now, Jeff?"

"Sheriff Ivers is worrying that maybe Scar Kelly has come back." I watched her face. It closed up, and the smile vanished. "He asked me to see if I could cross-cut his trail."

"You and Ivers would hunt Kelly down as

if he were a coyote!" Her tone made me wince. "Oh, I know how people talked when they heard I had taken up with a bandit. I didn't care then, and I don't care now. He stimulated me. He was a relief from this awful humdrum life. But you can tell the sheriff that Kelly has not come back."

I tipped my hat over one ear. "All right, Jessie. How're Frank and your mother?"

"I think they'll be glad to see you. Come on to the shack. I'll fix something to eat—milk, cottage cheese, and jackrabbit—homesteader's grub. Can you go for it? It sickens me." Jessie's voice was again bitter with the same terrible resentment which had boiled in her when the family had been forced off the Snaffle Bit.

"It sounds good to me." I tucked a hand under her arm, and we started up the hill. "I smell smoke." It was not the good clean smell of woodsmoke, but a combination of leather, rubber, rags and other trash.

"Yes," Jessie said. "Early this morning Dad and Mother gathered trash, and he set it on fire."

"He's showing some ambition again?"

"Not really," said Jessie in a hopeless tone. "Mostly he sits and broods, stares into space, won't talk. I've planted a garden. He didn't help, nor will he help me fence it. As for Mother, I'm afraid she'll never get over the jolt Caseman gave her. Jeff, do you wonder that I'm bitter? Sometimes I think I'll go crazy."

I put pressure on her arm. "It's none of my business, Jessie, but how are you and Buck Holmes hitting it off?"

"So you know about Buck? And being the kind-hearted old meddler you are, you'd like to think, 'Buck Holmes will persist where other admirers have dropped Jessie because—' I won't go on with that. However, I'll be frank with you about Buck Holmes.

"We've had moments together when we'd forget everything except each other. But—" her voice broke—"I had to tell Buck it was hopeless to believe we could ever have any future. Naturally, being a man, he said that he and I could leave here. It was tempting, but I had to make it plain to Buck that I'd never go back on Mother and Dad. Isn't that one thing about me you might approve of?"

ALL this had poured out in one rapid burst. I nodded, and again stole quick glances at the ground. Had the woman who'd met the night rider come down this slope from the J H house and gone back the same way? She had!

Jessie broke in on my abstraction. "Why so grim-faced, Jeff? What's wrong?"

Didn't she realize that *everything* was wrong? I mumbled, "Sorry," and rearranged my features.

We had now breasted the hill, and here on the benchland was a roomy log house. Most of the dirt had blown off its roof, so it leaked during the spring rains, driving Jessie wild, to say nothing of the effect it had on Irene's nerves. But Frank hadn't fixed it.

In the foreground at the right was a well, equipped with pulley, rope and bucket. Across the yard stood a set of tumbledown pole corrals and an equally tumbledown stable, a few pieces of machinery, and a wagon.

Four young calves were in one corral, chickens were busy in the yard, a mother cat had just brought in a gopher for her family of five. Four scrawny milk cows, one team of horses, and Jessie's sorrel saddle poney grazed the new grass on the bench, and a spot of brighter green marked Jessie's garden.

On an empty box near the well curb sat Frank Newberry, holding a pitchfork which he had been using to stir up a pile of smouldering trash. Here was a man still in the prime of life who should have been working, hustling, fighting to make a new home for his family. But he had quit like a balky horse.

It seemed as if he even wanted to look as slovenly as a barroom bum, with his hat pulled low over his eyes, his unshaven face, ragged shirt, dirty overalls, old shoes which he had neglected to lace, and, incongruously, clean white socks.

"Hello, Frank," I said. "How's the old settler?" I pushed out my right hand.

Ignoring this gesture, he said, "You here, Jeff? Hello." He was neither friendly nor unfriendly, just indifferent. But it was a studied indifference.

Our talk died, and I looked at the trash. Some things are hard to burn. The heel and part of the sole of a rubber boot had not been entirely burned, and the high heel of a wom-

an's shoe was still identifiable. Other things won't burn. I noticed three metal overall buttons.

Then my gaze went to a shovel leaning against the well curb. It had been used recently, possibly to dig a hole where the smouldering rubbish now lay, in order to bury something and then build a fire on top of the spot so no snooper would suspect that a hole had been dug.

Jessie, who had been moving about in a restless manner, called, "Come out here, Mother, and see Jeff Murdock."

Irene did not appear, but her voice came through an open window with two broken panes that were patched with boards. "What's Jeff Murdock doing here? I've never forgotten that he took Caseman's side against us, and I don't want to see him. Send him away."

Jessie was tense and holding her breath as she looked at me and whispered, "Jeff, I'm sorry this came up. But your staying now would irritate Mother." She ran into the house.

I walked twenty or thirty feet away from silent Frank Newberry, then called, "Would you like a snort of whisky, Frank?" I produced my small flask, so he could see it.

"Bring it to me," said Frank, eagerly.

"If you're too damned shiftless to come and get it, no dice."

He did what I wanted to make him do: he scrambled to his feet and came over to me, and he could not help flinching as he walked. Now I knew his reason for wearing white socks. They would not poison blistered heels and other rubbed-raw spots.

I gave Frank the drink, recorked the flask, and walked out. I did not go back the way I had come, but by the wagon trail which led over a hill north from the buildings and then on to meet the main road running west from Long Butte into the mountains.

Frank Newberry had done considerable walking only last night, so I was definitely cutting for sign. I found small fragments of gunnysack lint sticking to sagebrush. These had been pulled from the material in the same way that sagebrush will pluck bits of wool from a grazing sheep.

Following the trail blazed by these scraps, I came to softer soil than most of the hard-baked gumbo, and found footprints. Mere blobs, almost shapeless, they had been made by a man walking toward Long Butte, and wearing gunnysack padding over his footwear.

Throughout the West, gunnysacks have been used for winter overshoes when men had nothing better. But this fellow would have had no reason for wearing such overshoes except to conceal his footprints.

CERTAIN that he had been pointing from the J H toward Long Butte, I set to work to see if he had returned by the same route. About two hundred yards to the right of where his trail led toward town I found that he had done so. Again the sagebrush had plucked lint from his foot padding, and again I found a few blob-like prints, fresher than those pointing townward.

How did I know? Well, one of the many things an expert tracker must learn to figure out is when prints were made, or, in other words, how old they were. I wasn't as astute as Indians with whom I had once worked, but I was positive the man had walked toward Long Butte about ten o'clock last night, and had returned about three or four in the morning.

When I struck the main road it was almost impossible to find my man's prints, or any other sign. But eventually I saw where the fellow had lost one of his sack overshoes. Retrieving it, he had left the plain imprint of a man-size rubber boot.

Now you're getting someplace, I thought. But even though rubber boots and moccasins are the most difficult types of footwear to identify as belonging to some particular person, this wary bird didn't want prints to be found. He sat down in the middle of the road and tied on his gunnysack overshoe once again.

Moving along, I came to the edge of Long Butte, where the road widened into a street, bordered on my right by a row of cottonwoods and elms. But there were no homes this far out, and I zigzagged across this street, looking for more sign.

Here was something! When leaving town, Gunny Sacks had held close to the shade trees. But something had startled the fellow. He had broken into a run and then had dodged

behind a big cottonwood, and someone wearing high-heeled boots—who had followed Gunny Sacks out of town, as I discovered a few minutes later—had stopped twenty feet from the cottonwood.

This fellow had shifted restlessly, as if irritated or badly worried. The inference was that these two men had exchanged words. Then Boots had gone back into town, and Gunny Sacks had resumed his journey. I took pains to get an accurate mental photograph of those cowboy-boot prints, the length of the man's stride, and a lot of other little things.

No one had as yet taken any notice of me, and I continued to Sheriff Ivers's corral in as near a beeline as was possible. En route I passed the cabin which Buck Holmes had rented for sleeping quarters, then on past Caseman's bank to Ivers's place.

Now that I knew what to look for, I soon found several of those blob-like impressions made by a man wearing gunnysacks over his footwear. The fellow had come up to the corral and climbed over the fence whose rough poles, like the sagebrush, had gathered a few fragments of lint. There was some other sign to tell me what he had done, and to prove that Gunny Sacks was the same man who had made good use of Chico.

Luck had been with me, and I had finished my investigation before Long Butte's townsmen caught sight of me. When they did, a crowd gathered.

Sturgis Caseman and Sheriff Ivers spoke as one man. "Well, Jeff?"

I shook my head, making my face doleful. "I haven't found a doggoned thing yet, but I have a hunch the thief headed out over Butte Pass."

"Then you did cut some sign on him?" Ivers asked.

"Not enough to warrant sending out a posse, Sheriff. But I intend to check on the little I have. I'd like a pack horse and outfit, bed, grub and so on, and a saddle and horse for myself. Can I get 'em?"

"You sure can, Jeff," Ivers agreed.

Buck Holmes said, "Cut me in, Jeff. I'm going with you."

"No, Buck," I contradicted. "Everybody get this—I'm still playing a lone hand."

I rode out of town at dusk on the Butte Pass road but, instead of going to Butte Pass, I made camp in a gulch within a quarter mile north and west of the J H Ranch. Here I staked out pack horse and saddler, then plodded to the aspen hill overlooking the J H buildings.

I could not see them clearly, but sound travels uphill, and I believed I'd hear enough noise to tell me what was going on. It was probable that someone would visit the Newberrys tonight, or that one or all of the family would pull out. I'd stop them, of course.

BUT no strange sounds broke the stillness until dawn, when Buck Holmes appeared, startling me almost as much as Jessie had done yesterday. "So," he said, standing with his hand close to his holstered gun, "this is the way you ride over Butte Pass!"

I had underestimated Buck, something one of my experience should never do. Here was a dangerous man, because he feared I knew too much about the bank robbery. He was in love with Jessie, and he'd want to protect her and her family, even though until now he had probably never been involved in a crime.

"Don't just stare at me," he snapped. "What did you find when you were cutting for sign? What the devil are you doing here?"

"I must be slipping," I said quietly. "You trail me last night and then surprise me this morning, and I never get wise to the fact I've been trailed."

He made a deprecatory gesture. "I'm no tracker or trailer. I followed a hunch that you'd spy on the Newberrys, and this seemed the most likely spot for such sneaky stuff. Why are you doing this?"

"You've heard of Scar Kelly?" I countered.

"Sure. What about that outlaw?"

"He may have come back, Buck. He may have robbed Caseman's bank, and, if he's still in our neck of the woods, he's sure to try to see Jessie Newberry."

In the strengthening light of dawn, Buck studied my face. I'd given him a completely new line of thought, and he was suddenly less suspicious and less belligerent.

"You think that Kelly would have the gall to try to contact Jessie?" he demanded.

I hunched my shoulders. "Naturally. If you were in Kelly's boots, wouldn't you try your damnedest to see her?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "Yes. But are you riding herd on the J H in the hope that you can grab Kelly?"

"Do I have to spell it out for you? Sit down, boy, and relax."

Buck sat down and chewed on a stem of grass. "This Kelly angle hadn't occurred to me, nor to Ivers. But you're mighty secretive about the whole deal. Why, Jeff? Why?"

I snorted, "Pride. Old Jeff Murdock'd eat up the glory of taking in the bank robber and the loot single-handed."

"So that's it! But what did you learn from tracks and sign? Have you found Kelly's trail?"

I believed Buck wanted me to tell him I had. But even when such a statement would quiet his suspicion that I knew too much, I thought, grimly, I'll keep him sweating. After all, what I really want to accomplish is to throw a chill into all those involved in this theft; to make 'em regretful and penitent enough so they'll want to go straight!

"Buck," I said, and clamped a hand on his knee, "when a magician tells how he pulls the rabbit out of an empty hat, then he's all washed up. So lay off trying to pump me."

I mulled over something I wanted to plant in his head, and resumed, "I'm a right secretive old man, and may never tell anybody—certainly not Caseman or Ivers—all—" Here was a good place to leave the remark dangling, so I changed abruptly to, "Look! The ranch is coming alive."

Buck gave the buildings below our aspen hill his full attention. From here I could see a clutter of cottonwoods along the creek valley, and in one of those trees a ragged and abandoned magpie's nest caught my squint-eyed attention.

Jessie Newberry had come out of the house with two milk pails, and was crossing the yard to the corral where the milk cows were penned. The cat and her family closely trailed the girl, early-rising chickens were busy in the yard, and the calves were bawling for their breakfast.

I watched Buck Holmes. For a few moments his eyes sparkled, then his strong face tightened. As Jessie settled down to milk a roan cow, he exploded, "Gosh! She has to do all the work! And look at that ranch. Nobody could make a living on it."

"A good man could," I corrected, stern-voiced. "Look across the benchland to the right. There's more than a hundred acres of good meadow land, once it's watered; farther on to the west, extending into the valley of another creek, there's more of the same. There's enough open land for both a homestead and a desert claim. You can file on it, Buck, and maybe add to the original J H. And there's range for a couple of hundred cattle in these hills."

HOLMES was studying the setup as if he'd never seen it before, on his face the same expression I've seen many times in the weather-beaten faces of land-hungry settlers. Buck was a farmer at heart. But suddenly he frowned and shook his head.

"Jeff, you're having a pipe dream. In this country you can't raise anything without irrigation, and Long Butte Creek lies to deep in its valley for a man to get water out of it."

"So what? Look again to your right, where Little Bow Creek comes out of the hills. It isn't a deep valley. A ditch, tapping it, will solve the irrigation problem. Do you suppose you could talk Frank Newberry into working with you, if you were to settle on that adjoining claim?"

Buck's attention had shifted to Jessie again. She was carrying the filled milk pails to the house. Frank opened the door. Apparently they had a brief argument, then Jessie vigorously pushed the man toward the skimpy woodpile. Frank put a log on the sawbuck and wearily sawed off three blocks of wood. He split the blocks as if he hated to swing the ax, gathered up the one small armload of firewood, and returned to the house.

Buck Holmes clenched his hands in irritation. "You asked if I could talk Frank Newberry into working with me. Well, there's the answer. Was he ever worth a damn, Jeff?"

"Once both Fred and Irene were hustlers. There's no reason they couldn't hustle again, Buck."

"Jessie says Irene's a sick woman. She *can't* work, and Frank won't." Buck's gaze

roved the benchland. "I'd like to try to build up a ranch, but it's no good. Jessie and I would always have her parents to support."

For the first time I felt close to the young fellow, a man deeply in love who saw no way of surmounting the obstacles that faced him. I said, "Maybe not. Not if something happened—fear, shock, a terrific jolt—anything that would knock all the silly notions out of Irene and light a fire under Frank. Now if I were in your boots—"

"You can thank heavens you're not!" he said grimly.

A moment later we heard a rush of hoofs. Sheriff Ivers and five citizens of Long Butte passed without seeing Buck and me, dashed down the slope, reined up in the J H yard, and flung out of their saddles.

Frank and Jessie came out of the house, and Ivers fished an official-looking paper from a pocket, unfolded it, and showed it to them. Frank stepped back as if he'd been slapped dizzy, and it was apparent that Jessie's temper flared into words.

"What's going on, Jeff?" Buck gritted, "What does it mean?"

"Caseman and Ivers have decided the Newberrys are the most likely suspects. Ivers has come with a search warrant. He'll try to find the loot."

Buck was so burned up I realized he might do something rash. Not that I wasn't considering a rash move myself, for I was afraid the posse would find the cash, evidence which could send the Newberrys to the penitentiary. That was not what I wanted.

Two men brought out Irene Newberry and lined her up with Frank and Jessie near the well curb. While Buck Holmes writhed, Ivers searched all three of them, merely patting the women's clothing, however. Then one man stood guard over the Newberrys, while the others prowled the house and the stable. They even inspected all of the machinery and the wagon, and looked at every corral post.

"What's that for?" Buck asked me.

"They're checking to see if any posts have been reset. If one has, they'll dig it up and explore underneath."

"I'll be damned! I have a good notion to rush down there, tell 'em what I think of 'em, and run 'em off."

"You stay put," I growled harshly. "Interference with the law can bring mighty serious charges."

"Do *you* think they'll find any money?" Buck's question was razor-sharp, but I shrugged it off.

The disappointed searchers lowered one man into the well. When they pulled him up, he shook his head. Next, Jessie's garden attracted the posse. Armed with Frank's pitchfork and his shovel, they dug up almost every foot of this small garden—and they did not replant the young vegetables.

EVENTUALLY Ivers called attention to Frank's pile of burned trash. One fellow used the fork, another the shovel. They pushed the refuse aside and began digging up the spot the ashes had covered. I was condemning myself. Why didn't you sneak down last night and get that boodle? I asked myself. You had time enough. But it's too late now.

But when at length Ivers inspected the hole, he made a gesture of futility, and at last all of the posse rode out. I breathed normally once more, and gave Buck a probing glance. His nerves had been even tighter drawn than mine. But he had now relaxed.

For the second time, the riders passed Buck and me without seeing us, bound now for Long Butte. The Newberrys were safer than they had been before this investigation. But I could not believe my sign reading and deductions were false. My gaze went to the abandoned magpie nest in the cottonwood, then flicked back to Frank, Jessie, and Irene, who were evidently talking over what had happened.

Frank stepped aside, and he, too, squinted directly toward that cottonwood. As he again faced Irene, Jessie's back was toward him, and I saw him shake hands with himself.

Irene led Frank into the house, and Jessie ran to her ruined garden. For moments she looked at the plot, then sat down abruptly. Her bright head and shoulders sagged forward.

Buck gritted, "Look at that! Before I leave this country I'm going to give Ivers the licking he's got coming."

"If I were a young sprout in love," I said, "I'd go down there, fast."

"I'm going! You'll stay here, hoping to catch Scar Kelly?"

"Yes, today and tonight anyhow. If you want to get in touch with me, whistle like a meadowlark as you come to this grove. And Buck, why not put a bug in Frank's ear about your taking up a claim?"

"That's no good." Buck was leading his horse out of the aspens.

I watched him ride to where Jessie was sitting, dismount, and squat down facing her. Then I walked to my camp, ate a meal of sorts, and lay down to rest. But worry about this peculiar mess robbed me of sleep. After talking things over, Frank, Irene, and Buck might decide to kill the only man they had good reason to fear—Jeff Murdock!

But nothing happened, and I was back atop the hill before sundown. Later, when lights were out on the J H, I heard an imitation of a meadowlark's song, and Buck came walking up the slope.

"Jeff, I have big news for you. Read this." He handed me a scrap of paper.

"I can't read in the dark," I said. "Do you know what it says?"

"Do I! Jeff, I knew your hunch about Scar Kelly could be right, so I looked for some likely place where Jessie and Kelly might leave notes for each other. Now there's a lone yellow pine near Long Butte Creek, with a woodpecker hole in it. When I saw that, I poked my hand into the hole and found this scrap of paper."

My astonishment was genuine. I had looked there too and hadn't found anything. "What does it say?" I demanded.

"It reads, 'Jessie, I don't dare see you, for that'd stir up old memories. But I want you to know I've evened scores with Caseman. You'll soon hear that his bank was robbed. I left my own horse in town and borrowed one to come here by way of the creek to leave a note for you. Now I'm going back to town. I know you wouldn't take stolen money, so I'll just make tracks with the loot. Goodbye, Jessie. You'll never see me again. Kelly.'"

Buck could not know how tight was the rein I was holding on my temper! "It seems that Scar Kelly slipped a fast play over on me," I growled.

"Yes," said Buck, "he did. And we have no idea where to find him. But the mystery is solved, and this manhunt is ended."

"Reckon I may as well pull out for town," I said. "What'll you do?"

"Stay on the J H for a few days. When you show Kelly's message to Ivers and Caseman, they'll know for sure that Kelly did the job. But they can't blame you because he got away. This is a load of worry off me. Well, it's time I was hitting the hay. Good night, Jeff."

AS BUCK ran down the slope, it was a wonder he didn't feel my eyes burning holes in his back. A man can explode without speaking aloud, and I did. Damn it! I said to myself, they've made the wrong decision. They intend to hold onto that money, and Buck believes he can hoodwink me with a faked note! Buck may be stringing along with Frank and Irene in the hope that they'll pull out with the money and leave him free to court Jessie.

At this point I was tempted to let the Newberrys and Buck get away with their crooked work. Then came the bitter thought, how can Jessie and Buck start a new life with that black cloud hanging over them? No, that won't do! So I have to tell Sheriff Ivers what I know.

Suddenly, to my alarm, I heard rustlings in the underbrush. Then Jessie materialized. "Still here, Jeff?" she called.

"Still here, Jessie." I stepped out where she could see me.

She came to me with a rush. "I must talk to you, Jeff, and you must help me."

I pulled in a deep breath. "Once upon a time, in happier days, you called me 'Uncle Jeff.' I'd like you to think of me that way now, and let yourself go."

"That feeling is back now, Jeff. Oh, last fall I did get mad at you; I believed you'd let me down. But I don't feel that way any more."

"Thanks, Jessie." My arm went around her shoulders, and the lump in my throat was as big as a pack saddle.

"Something is wrong with Mother and Dad. They've been scared half to death since the day before yesterday. Early that morning,

Mother helped Dad pile up trash and burn it. Such energy, when they've had none at all for so long! Afterward, Mother kept walking out to where she could look toward the creek at the place where that old yellow pine stands. Eventually, she called to me, 'Jessie, someone's down yonder. Go see who it is and what he's doing.' "

"So you met me, Jessie," I said gently, "and we had a little visit like old times. Did that worry you?"

"Not right away. But after you'd gone, Mother and Dad had the shivering willies."

I silently commented, "I'm glad they had the shivering willies. And I'm going to give 'em more of the same.

Jessie went on, "Then Ivers and his posse came with a search warrant. I realize I let my tongue run wild last fall, yet I never would actually have carried out those threats. You do believe that, Jeff?"

"I do believe it, Jessie."

"Thanks. Well, I hadn't even heard of the bank robbery until Ivers came. Darn him, he didn't find any money. But after the posse had gone, Dad and Mother were as uneasy as a herd of longhorns in a thunderstorm. Remember, Jeff, the old days when you and I were herding cattle in a bad storm?"

Tears glistened in her eyes. "I often wish—" Her low voice broke, and her fingers pressed hard on my arm—"I was just a little girl again, fishing, hunting, riding range with cowboys, working on the ranch—and loving all of it."

"Me, too," I echoed, my voice choking.

She got control of herself and went on. "Well, Buck came and sort of relieved my tension. But when he said, 'Jeff Murdock is up on the hill,' a cold sweat broke out on Dad, and Mother screamed, 'Why is Jeff there, Buck?' Buck said, 'Jeff believes Scar Kelly robbed the bank, and he hopes he'll catch Kelly here.' "

Jessie pushed out her chin, looking up into my eyes. "Jeff, didn't you believe me when I told you Kelly was not here? Or were you riding herd on the J H for some other reason?"

"Are you going to marry Buck Holmes?" I asked.

"You're hedging. But yes, I'd marry Buck if things were so that I could. But he, too, is all wound up and jittery as a skittish bronc. Jeff, you must tell me what's so badly wrong, and what I can do to help straighten things out."

I hesitated, pinching my long chin, my eyebrows pulled together over my nose. I didn't see how the nasty mess could come out except as tragic to her future, but I said, "Trust me, honey. Everything is going to work out all right."

Her eyes were searching my face. "You won't tell me the truth either. You're hedging again. Jeff, I believe I have surmised what is the matter with Buck, Mother and Dad. They are sure you know they are involved in the robbing of Caseman's bank."

"That's it, Jessie!"

SHE slipped free of my arm and sat down as suddenly as if her knees had turned to rubber.

"But let me set you straight," I resumed, hunkering down facing her. "Frank and Irene are sure I know they're guilty, but Buck believes he has me hoodwinked."

She said, low, "Jeff, I'd be the one you'd naturally suspect, not Mother. When I interrupted you the day before yesterday, you had found something important to you. Was it footprints that told you a story?"

"Yes, Jessie. A woman—you, I reckoned—had met a rider who was using Long Butte Creek to hide his horse's tracks. Ten or fifteen minutes later, I was positive that not you, but Irene, had met the horseman."

Her eyes were big and round. "How could you figure that out? You had no chance to match the right shoes with the footprints."

"No, I didn't. But I was watching you closely, and a tracker notices how a person walks—toes in, toes out, toes straight ahead; length of stride, how he or she breaks over at the toe as the foot comes up, how it is set down, width between the feet. A score of little things told me you hadn't left those prints."

I was warming up to my subject, for reading tracks and trail signs has always fascinated me. But Jessie was saying, "Jeff, you've told me that everything will come out

(Continued on page 68)

800P

Rita Hayworth was once acclaimed as Hollywood's—and the world's—"Goddess of Love". Ten years and three husbands later, the Goddess is making a painful come-back. Read the full, intimate story of her bitter-sweet yesterdays and her hopeful tomorrows in

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all right. What do you mean by 'all right?' "

One part of my mind had been at work on this knotty problem. For Jessie's peace of mind, and for her future, I had to come through with the right answer to her question. Fortunately, I now believed I could handle and control the ugly situation.

"Relax," I said confidently. "Nobody is going to jail, and only you and me, your family, and Buck Holmes will ever know who robbed Caseman's bank. Trust me, and out of this nightmare you'll wakeup to a new life and a good, sound future!"

Her eyes searched my face in the starlight. "I do not trust you, Jeff." She sprang to her feet. "Can I help in any way?"

"Yes. Tomorrow morning I must see Frank and Irene alone. So will you go with Buck for a long walk? Be cheerful, hopeful, enthusiastic, and stay away from the J H buildings until I signal to you and you see Sheriff Ivers approaching."

"Ivers will be coming here again?" The girl shivered. "You've told him the truth, and—"

"I've told him nothing! But he's a decent fellow, fair and square. So, if what I plan to do works out, I believe he's sure to come and apologize for the rough stuff he pulled this morning."

"Ivers apologize to us?"

"Yes, Jessie. Let me see you safely back to the house."

Jessie's hand was tight on my arm as we walked down the slope in silence. Near the dwelling, I whispered, "Don't wake your folks or Buck. Go to bed and go to sleep. See you in the morning."

"I'll try to sleep, now that I've talked to you. I'll try very hard. Night, Jeff."

After the door closed behind Jessie, I became very busy. Some of the work I did in the next five-six hours was stealthy, and and so dangerous that if I'd been caught I'd have invited a bullet with no chance for me to explain. The embarrassment of trying to explain might have been worse than a bullet, too.

But I didn't get caught, and, mounted on my borrowed saddle horse, I rode to the J H as the sun was rising, and right on into the stable where Buck Holmes was bedded down.

"Hi, Buck! Come alive. This is Jeff."

As if a rattlesnake had buzzed in his face, he sat up and reached under his pillow to grab his gun. "Jeff! What are you doing here? Have you told Ivers about Scar Kelly?"

"I'll see Ivers later. Will you do something for me right now, Buck?"

"That depends."

Pulling on his clothes, he watched me with open suspicion. Earlier in this game, Buck had been scornful of my ability. Later, meeting me at the aspen grove, he had doubted his earlier appraisal. But when I had mentioned Kelly he had assumed that I was still in the dark.

NOW he was once again afraid that I knew too much. It was possible, too, that Buck and Frank had discussed killing me.

So I watched him, not knowing what he might do.

"So you haven't told Ivers," he said in a gritty voice. "And that means you didn't fall for the note!"

"Easy, feller," I said. "You're wound up tighter than a spool of barbed wire."

"You would be, too, if—" Buck fastened his belt and stood up. "Old timer, when I gave you that Kelly note I believed I could silence my conscience. It was no good. Now I've got to come clean with you."

A happy feeling tingled my nerves, and I thought, that's something I've been hoping the boy would say!

"I hate myself for not telling the sheriff what I know about the robbery." Buck ran his words together. "But I'd despise myself if I did talk. The shock'd be too awful for Jessie. So what will I do?"

"Shut up and keep your lips buttoned," I said, adding, "Buck, I've known for some time that you were caught in a bear trap with spiked jaws. Now get out of here. Take Jessie, and go pick out a place for your new cabin."

"Hell's bells, Jeff, why do that now? Something worse than a Kansas twister is going to hit Jessie's family."

I gave him a push and said, "Probably Jessie'll tell you I promised her that every-

thing is going to work out all right. Now force out a cheerful grin and get going."

There was a minute about a year long for me before Buck said, "All right. Was I a cocky fool to underestimate *you!*"

With the early sunlight shining on her milk pails and on her pretty hair, Jessie was coming across the yard. Buck met her, and as they walked away, holding hands, something made my eyes smart. I stalled my horse, plodded across the yard, entered the house, and, hearing sounds in the kitchen, stepped into it without knocking.

Irene Newberry, somewhat plump, but a pretty woman, with golden-red hair now streaked with gray, was packing a suitcase on the kitchen table. She seemed to be in perfect health, strong and purposeful. But when she saw me, she dropped a glass bottle from suddenly trembling hands. Frank was building a fire in the kitchen stove, and his hands clamped on a stick of kindling. His knuckles turned white.

I let the silence stretch out and tighten. Irene came through first. "Wh—why, how do you do, Jeff? What can you want here? Remember that I'm sick, and visitors annoy me."

I pulled a chair out from the table and sat down. "I'm kind of tired from cutting sign and riding herd on a pair of quitters who have turned crooks. Sit down, both of you!"

Frank spluttered, "Go to—" and stopped, and then took a seat facing me. "The jig's up, Irene."

She glared at me across the table. "Pull yourself together, Frank! Jeff can't possibly know—"

"Know what you did?" I put in. "First off, Frank, you scouted in town, while pretending to be drunk. When the time came for action, and after making sure Jessie was asleep, you pulled on rubber boots and wrapped them in gunnysacks. Nobody can track me, you thought, and hoofed it to Long Butte. You robbed the bank, then went to Ivers's corral, climbed over the fence, got a bridle from Ivers's barn, and caught his bay horse, Chico.

"After you'd scrambled astride Chico bareback, you yanked off the gunnysacks, not wanting to wet them in the creek. But you took them along with you, as well as the money. From the corral you rode to Long Butte Creek, and then followed the stream's channel to Ole Anderson's ranch.

"You thought that would throw me off the trail, even if I had followed your sign through the stream. You rode back downstream and stopped close to the big yellow pine at the foot of the hill. Irene was waiting. You handed her the loot, then rode back to town.

"Why did you make this hard trip? Because if I should find this water trail, the fact that a man rode out from town and then returned should convince even me that the thief must be someone who lived in Long Butte! One other point: you didn't want to take chances by having the cash on you while walking back home. Someone might meet you, and your sack overshoes would arouse his suspicion."

"All that's very interesting as a theory," said Irene, with an attempt at sarcasm.

"Back at Ivers's corral after your ride, Frank, you slid off Chico onto the corral fence, where you perched and resacked your feet. Then you put the bridle back where it belonged, climbed over the fence, and legged it for the Butte Pass road and home.

"It so happened that you went past the cabin where Buck Holmes sleeps, and by one of those strange quirks of fate, Buck was awake and heard and saw you. Probably Buck thought, 'What's Frank Newberry doing at this hour? I'd better see if he's drunk; maybe I'll have to help him get home.'"

"Bunk!" Frank exploded. "You're crazy!"

"Buck followed you," I resumed. "You hid behind a cottonwood. Buck called to you, and when you recognized him you decided you must take a chance that Buck, being in love with Jessie, would not turn you in. So you and Buck swapped words; then he went back to his cabin and you scurried for home."

FRANK thumped his forehead with his knuckles. "So that's how you tie Buck into this deal! I'd believed my gunnysack overshoes would stop even you from finding prints. But hell, the devil himself couldn't fool you on trail sign!"

"A doubtful compliment, but thanks, Frank. Safe home, you and Irene dug a hole and buried the loot before Jessie woke up. You gathered rubbish and made a fire above this spot, to hide the fact that the soil had been disturbed, and to burn the used gunnysacks, overalls, socks, rubber boots, and one pair of Irene's shoes.

"Several hours later I came along, and both of you were scared stiff, but didn't dare ask me questions. Yet you took notice, Frank, of how I squinted at your shovel and your burned trash. And you thought I suspected that the cash was hidden here. Anyhow, you moved it, and thus stopped Ivers from finding it."

"Did you put Ivers up to searching this ranch?" Irene demanded.

"Nope. But he did you a good turn, for since he found nothing, that put you in the clear—with the sheriff. Skipping a lot more details, let's get to that fake Kelly note."

"Fake note!" Irene cried. "Kelly did leave that message, and it proves he's the bank robber. Frank, I've been listening to Jeff long enough. All his story amounts to is that he infers such and such, or surmises such and so from reading tracks. Jeff, you haven't evidence worth this." She snapped her fingers. "Shall I point out again that Sheriff Ivers did not find any stolen money?"

I twisted my face to make myself look mean, ugly, tough, and I said, "Sheriff Ivers overlooked the magpie's nest in the big cottonwood. But I didn't. Last night I climbed that tree, and I know where the loot is now!"

All the starch went out of Irene. She sat down. There was silence until Frank said, "Jeff, when Buck told me you were snooping around I thought hard about killing you. But I'm damned if I could drive myself to do it."

"You weren't cut out to be a crook, Frank. Let's step outside and see what Buck and Jessie are doing."

As we went out the front door, I was trying to find the right words with which to slap both of them, and came up with, "Ever since you lost the Snaffle Bit, you two have given Jessie the rawest kind of a deal. And I reckon, in doing what you've done now, you never gave her, or her future, a thought."

"We have too," Frank contradicted. "Thinking of her is one of the things that's driven Irene and me nearly crazy. That is, since I robbed Caseman, it's preyed on us."

"So? Look yonder. I pointed across the bench to where we could see Jessie and Buck. "Maybe the young people are making big plans—picking out the spot for their house, and figuring how they can start from scratch and build up an outfit. What you've done'll ruin all that for them."

I was watching Irene Newberry, glad to see she was having unhappy thoughts. Frank's face was as glum as that of a sick hound.

"Don't the kids remind you of your own younger days?" I went on. "The days when I'd come by and find you two happily working to build up the Snaffle Bit?"

"Yep!" said Frank. "Those were the best days of my whole life. I wish we could—"

"Could start all over again," Irene finished for him, and I mentally shook hands with myself.

"It's too late now," Frank said. "And too late for us to make up to Jessie for what we've done to her. Jeff, I know you have to turn us in. Of course we figured we were justified. But now we see how trying to get out of one awfully bad fix has only put us in another a damned sight worse. Irene, we're going to jail, and it's all my fault for being a yellow-bellied quitter."

"It's my fault more than yours, Frank." The woman was suddenly crying.

Frank put one arm around her shoulders, and I looked down the aspens on the hill, fervently hoping that Ivers would show up. He was coming! I waved my hat to signal to Jessie, coughed loudly to attract Frank's attention, and said, "Sheriff Ivers has come in sight. You two face him and do your darnedest to act as if you're not scared. Act natural. Let him do all the talking. All of it! I'm ducking out of sight, and don't tell him I'm here."

I went into the house, closed the door, raised a window, then took a stand where I could look out into the yard unseen.

Buck, Jessie, and the sheriff arrived at almost the same moment. Ivers sang out, "Hello, folks! Hi, Buck! I want to apologize for what I did here yesterday. In fact, the possemen chipped in, and we raised fifty dollars. Here it is, Jessie—" He flipped an envelope to Jessie, who caught it—"to pay for the damage we did your garden. All of us fellows want to square ourselves with you Newberrys."

Frank and Irene reminded me of fence posts. But Buck piped up, "How come, Sheriff?"

Ivers grabbed his hat and slapped it against his saddle horn. "How come? The darnedest thing you ever heard of has happened! Caseman found the stolen bank money in his living room first thing this morning. There was no note to tell who'd brought it back—not one clue, just the money!"

AN HOUR and a half later, leading my borrowed pack horse, I rode into Long Butte. Before I could report to Ivers and Caseman, they were telling me the big news. "But we have no idea of who stole the cash or who brought it back. What did you find on Butte Pass?"

This was where I was supposed to have gone. After I'd registered stunned amazement, I said, "I failed to cut any kind of sign on Butte Pass. I reckon that for once I'm stumped." I managed to look both doleful and chagrined.

Actually I was reliving the minutes on the J H immediately after Ivers started back to town. Through the window I saw Frank and Irene looking at each other with fresh hope, reborn vitality, and a new outlook in their eyes. Then Buck Holmes and Jessie burst into the house. Buck grabbed my hand and crushed it.

"Thank God that you knew what to do, Jeff, and did it!"

Jessie pushed him aside, threw her arms around my neck, pulled down my head, and kissed me. Kissed me—the lean old gray wolf who *doesn't* always get his man!

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. In bulldogging steers in the rodeos, on which side of the steer does the bulldogger ride?

2. Luis Terrazas is reliably reputed to have had his brand on more cattle at one time than any other cattle king who ever lived. Where was his ranch?

3. Chumash, Napa, Yokut, Miwok, Chinook, Klamath, Hupa, Hookooeko, Mokelumne and Pomo are names of what kind of groups once resident in California?

4. Alcatraz, the name of the rock island in San Francisco Bay on which is located a Federal penitentiary, is the Spanish word for what comic-looking aquatic bird?

5. Do maples grow wild anywhere in the west?

6. Which of the following famous "Johns" of the old west was (1) a cattle king, (2) a gunman, (3) an Arizona sheriff: John W. Hardin, John Slaughter, John S. Chisum?

7. What man or boy on a roundup crew did old-time cowboys sometimes call the "jingler?"

8. Moab, Monticello, Cortez, Grand Junction, Farmington and Grants are all important centers of uranium mining. By pairs, name the three Western states they are in.

9. Francisco Villa was a famous Mexican bandit general more commonly known by what nickname that is the Spanish equivalent of "Frank?"

10. "Branded West" is the title of the 1956 anthology of best western short stories by members of WWA. What does WWA stand for?

——Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 91. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

By FRANCIS H. AMES

RANGE

WHEN ROSS POWLSON looked at Ida, he thought of settling down . . . but all she could see of him was the gun he carried

ROSS POWLSON had ridden up the erratic course of the Powder River from the foothills of the Bighorns, turning east by north at Broadus to angle toward the Missouri River, with his last job a month behind him. The sage flats had been an endless monotony of dust-choked plain and swale, shimmering in an August sun. The purple shadows of evening were falling now, bringing Powlson relief from the day's heat. He straightened in his saddle and looked about, easing his cramped muscles.

The flats ended here. The land rose in gentle undulations of sunburned buffalo grass, seemingly lifeless, yet Powlson knew that there must be cattle here, for this was some of the best graze in the West. On the summit of the first rising he pulled up, surveying the country, making out the buildings of a large spread in the blue distance.

A half hour later Powlson rode his weary gelding into the yard, dismounted at the kitchen door of the ranch house, and knocked, a tall, light-haired man, his thin, weathered features cocked with listening for approaching footsteps. The door opened and a young woman looked out at him. For the flickering of a moment it seemed to Powlson that he had seen her some place before; then he felt sure that he was mistaken.

"Yes?" she queried, meeting Powlson's gaze somberly.

"I'd like to rest and water my mount," he said. He uncovered his head, curling the wide, alkali-dusted brim of his hat in his hands.

The woman's eyes seemed to move down to those hands, with their long, slender fingers, and then they moved up to Powlson's face, and she smiled. Ida Casternack's smile was a thing that stirred men where they lived, a slow twisting of the lips to softness, and an unveiling of her eyes, letting a man see what lay beneath.

She was as vital as flame, tall, slender, with dark hair wound around her head in braids, her eyes as black as new pansies. It was a smile that most men felt. Powlson felt it more than most; his eyes hungered for her. She saw what lay in his face, and her smile sobered, became uncertain. Then voices came from the barn in increasing volume, and the spell that lay between them was broken.

"This is Emil Jernsted's Falcon," Ida Casternack said. "I run the house. Art Gaunt is foremen. Here they come now."

Powlson raised a hand to her as he went toward the men. As he approached, several horsemen rode into the yard and began to dismount and put up their horses. The quiet yard suddenly became a place of activity, with the ending of the day for the crew. The two men the woman had indicated stood apart, watching Powlson's approach, and as he neared them he studied them from long habit.

He decided that the wide-spanned, gray-haired individual with the look of command was Emil Jernsted. The other, a tall, exceedingly slender man, with dark eyes over a long thin nose, must be Art Gaunt. Once again he found his mind puzzled by a faint familiarity about a person. This time it did not go away, and his mind nagged at it, for he was a man who usually rememberd a face, once known.

DRIFTER

Ida screamed and latched on to Gaunt's gun arm . . .

"I'm Ross Powlson," he said, addressing himself to Jernsted. "I'm riding north. I'd like to water and rest my horse."

"Of course," Jernsted said heartily. "We're about to eat. You're welcome to join us, Powlson. If you're looking for work, maybe I can use you."

"His kind," Art Gaunt said flatly with a touch of sardonic humor in his face, "don't work, Jernsted. This man is a drifter and an outlaw. His name isn't Powlson, it's Bellamy. I know him by reputation."

"You're a liar, mister," Powlson said, smiling. "You're only half right."

Anger came to Gaunt's features and he took a threatening step forward.

"Careful." Powlson warned him. "You aren't exactly sure which half you're correct on."

Jernsted made an impatient motion toward

the foremen, motioning Gaunt back. "It doesn't matter," he said sharply. "The man can eat and rest his horse. Falcon turns no one away hungry. You're too free with your lip, Gaunt."

Powlson turned away to care for his horse. Later, when he entered the large room where the men were seated, he looked the crew over as he ate. He was a man who kept alive by paying close attention to detail, and a vague feeling built up in his mind that there was something slightly awry here.

Ida Casternack moved about the table taking care of the hungry crew's needs, yet the men did not engage her in the usual banter due such a comely woman. Ida was too attractive, to Powlson's way of thinking, too vibrant, not to attract attention from such men as these, in a country such as this, where a dog-faced circus lady could easily corral a husband. The men treated her with too much reserve.

A slow caution stirred in Powlson, for he realized that only fear of some particular man could restrain these rough range riders from making advances to such a pretty female. It would take more than fear to hold them back; it would require absolute panic.

Powlson ate in silence, then filed out with the crew. He washed up, shaved, unrolled his bedroll in the bunkhouse to obtain fresh clothes, washed a hundred miles to the south, in the well-watered foothills of the Bighorns. When he came out into the yard again, full darkness had come down. The sky was a canopy of stars, the air held the soft warmth that comes to Montana evenings only in August.

THE crew were playing poker inside, under the light of a kerosene lamp, and the hum of their voices was a pleasant thing, restful after the long, lonely ride. Powlson leaned against the bunkhouse wall, where the light from within touched him. He rolled a smoke, thinking of other ranches where he had been a stranger, there a few minutes, a few hours, a few days, and then moving on again.

It was a vicious circle that he fully intended to make end, yet continually put off ending. He found himself wondering if he would ever settle down. Few of his breed did, he knew, and the thought disturbed him more than he cared to admit. Such men as he usually wound up dead, or took to talking too much in advanced years, telling long-winded stories to men who didn't believe a word they said.

He pondered the difference between himself and those who settled down young, and then he forgot about it. Ida Casternack came out of the kitchen door, standing slimly outlined in its light, looking directly toward the glow of Powlson's cigarette.

Powlson's full attention was attracted to her. He watched her close the door, and in the sudden darkness he lost sight of her momentarily. A few minutes later, his eyes becoming accustomed to the night he saw her silhouetted on the brink of the hill, against the stars. She stood there a long moment, then turned deliberately and looked back in his direction Powlson's blood quickened with the thought that this was an invitation to join her. He moved to stand beside her.

"The stars," he said, "are awfully close tonight. They're friends of mine."

"The stars," she said softly, "are your friends. Tell me about it."

"There's nothing to tell," he said, and harshness crept unbidden into his voice. Some men have other company, I go to bed with the stars."

He really hadn't thought about it in that way before, but now he knew it was true. He suddenly knew why some men settled down and others drifted. Some men found the right woman to settle down with, one who made settling down worthwhile.

"Jernsted offered you a job," Ida Casternack said, as though reading his thoughts. "Why didn't you take it?"

It was a direct question which required a direct answer, and with the thought fresh in his mind he fed it to her straight. "Being a woman," he said bluntly, "you know the answer. When a woman ropes a man in, he squats where she finds him. If she doesn't get him he drifts."

"I'd never rope a man in," she said. "When I marry, my man will want me as badly as I expect to want him."

The still, warm night, her nearness, the headiness of the faint touch of perfume she wore, brought a wanting of her to Powlson

that almost caused him to reach for her. But he took a step away.

"It wouldn't be difficult," he said, "for a man to want you, and badly, Ida. But what did you want of me?"

He expected her to deny that she had wanted anything of him, to deny that she had walked out here in the darkness and looked over her shoulder to attract him to her side. When she did not, it brought him a strange feeling of satisfaction, as though she had in some way measured up to a standard he had set for her.

"I wanted to talk to you privately," she told him frankly. "You see, I know who you are, what you are. I need such a man."

"So," he said explosively, "that's it! What's your pitch, lady?"

"There's a man," she said, "hiding in these hills with a rope waiting for him if Art Gaunt finds him. I want Art Gaunt killed."

He found himself marveling at the cold venom in her voice, in comparison to its softness when she had spoken of the stars and of marriage, and his inate distrust of women stirred in warning.

"I'm not a killer," he said flatly. "Whatever else I may be, I'm not that."

"Not a killer!" her voice was scornful. "I was working as a waitress in Carlton when you did a job of killing in Texas. And what have you accomplished since, in Wyoming and Colorado? You still wear a gun as if it were a part of you."

He recalled her vaguely now—a waitress in the Carlton Hotel in Texas, seventeen perhaps, the daughter of a homesteader who had been dragged to death by a runaway team. She had been a girl fresh off the farm then, a slip of a thing who put grub before him at a time when his mind was otherwise occupied with Texas troubles.

"There have been times," he said, "when killing was necessary. There always have been such times for men who take pride in themselves as men. In Colorado I wore a deputy's badge, in Texas it was justice."

"Justice!" she exclaimed impatiently. "What I ask is also justice, Tom Bellamy. This man is dear to me, and innocent. In some way he has been made to seem guilty, and I'm sure that Art Gaunt is behind it all."

"Why Gaunt?" he queried.

"I don't know why." She was almost sobbing now. "Not for sure. I just know that what I feel is right. Kill Gaunt and that will be the end of it."

He turned savagely upon her. "Now you know," he said harshly, "why men like me don't settle down. They meet women like you. They're young and soft and beautiful and act wanting, and a man gets all soft and eager inside. He begins to think of a home and of kids, and then he discovers, if he's not an utter fool, that the woman only wants to use him for her own ends. Yes, Ida. Fools fall for it, but better men ride on and keep on riding."

"No!" she cried, coming tight against him. "No, Tom. It isn't that way at all."

SHE was making another try, he knew, in a woman's way, using a woman's most dangerous weapon. This was something he fully realized, yet could find no will within him to resist. He put his arms around her, tilted her chin, and kissed her full on the lips, long and lingeringly, feeling the hard core of anger flowing out of him. Then regaining control of his will, he pushed her away and walked toward the bunkhouse, with blood pounding at his temples. In the bunkhouse, he slung his bedroll on his shoulder. Gaunt was at the card table.

"Thank Jernsted for me," he said. "I'm riding on now."

The tightness went away from Gaunt's eyes and his smile was twisted with venom.

"He won't be surprised," he said. "Your kind don't work."

Powlson took a long step toward the foreman. Seeing the anger in his face, Gaunt started to rise from his chair. Powlson let him get halfway up, then lifted a fist from his knees. The blow caught Gaunt on the point of the chin, off balance, lifted him over his chair, skidded his body into the sheet-iron stove, and brought the pipes down in a cascading of soot.

Powlson walked out without looking back. Still standing on the brow of the hill, Ida Casternack could see into the lamplighted bunkhouse. A slow smile curved her lips when she saw Gaunt pinwheeled over his chair with one blow.

Powlson made camp five miles out, rolled

out his bed, then lay in it, looking up at the stars, knowing that he could never again get the comfort from them that he had in the past. From now on they would always remind him of the reason that he hadn't settled down, taken land, and become a prosperous rancher, as he had planned for so many years.

And thinking along this line, he knew, would always bring to him a mental picture of a woman who walked at night and looked back at him, calling him to her side. He would remember the softness of her lips and his hunger for them.

It was a strange thing, considering all the other women he had met and casually passed by, that this one should remain so vivid in his mind. This woman had a man sulking in the hills that she thought so much of she would desire another killed in cold blood to save him. Powlson went to sleep thinking of that man who had so strong a claim on Ida Casternack's heart.

He awakened as he always did, instantly alert to his surroundings, with all his faculties savoring the dawn—the complaining of magpies from the buffalo berry thickets, the cool wetness of dew on his face, the glory of the sun's first rays on the ridges, the sweet tang of morning air. When the magpies' cries were joined by those of a bluejay, caution stirred in Powlson. Without moving his body, his hand crept to the gun beneath his head.

"I wouldn't," a deep voice warned.

Powlson pulled his hand back, then put both hands down flat on the canvas of his tarp, observing the man who now moved into his range of vision, a cocked Colt pointed at Powlson's chest.

"You're a friend of Gaunt's, I take it," Powlson said sourly. "Put the gun away mister, and hand me my pants so I can get up decently and beat your block off."

"I'm no friend of Gaunt's," the man said.

Powlson looked him over carefully. He was a big man, wide of shoulder and narrow of waist. His hand engulfed the Colt as though it were a mere water pistol. He's strong, Powlson told himself, but not too fast. Anger lay in the dark eyes, which met Powlson's squarely, without a flicker of wandering. Powlson let what he saw dictate his next move.

"My pants," he said pleasantly, "are under the foot of my bed roll. I'm going after them, and to hell with you."

Powlson got his pants, pulled them on, then stamped into his boots. The man circled him cautiously, kicked his gun out of reach, then tossed his own after it.

"I don't like characters," he said harshly, "who rough up women."

The blow he swung with the words was wide and looping, and Powlson weaved beneath it, ripping both of his fists to the belly. Then he sidestepped and drove a wallop that carried real power below his opponents ear. A surprised look came to the man's face, but he moved in with sledgehammer punches that felt as if they were caving Powlson's ribs.

He caught Powlson by the front of the shirt, pulled him forward, clubbed him beside the head, picked him up bodily, and flung him into a clump of buffalo berry bushes, and raced after him. Powlson jumped to his knees, grabbed a leg and brought the man down, then kicked him away with the heel of his boot.

His spur rowel caught in the fellow's shirt and ripped it down the front, snapping his belt. He rolled aside and then came up, his pants dropped about his ankles. As he reached down to pull them up, Powlson caught him flush on the chin and laid him out cold.

The blow beside the head had dazed Powlson. He leaned against a cedar while he rolled a smoke. It was half made when he heard the sound of approaching hoofs and lunged for his gun, twisting about. Ida Casternack rode around from the brush clump, then pulled up looking at the shambles of the camp. The downed man sat up, holding his head in his hands.

"You stopped him for me, Mike," Ida said.

The stupid look went away frm Mike's eyes as he looked up at her. "It was the other way around," he said. "Give me a gun, Ida."

The girl's eyes moved to Powlson, seeing the alert readiness in his face.

"No gun, Mike," she said. "I warned you about that. You wouldn't have a chance with this one."

"She wants me alive—" Powlson's voice was bitter—"so she can use me. She's a schemer from here to breakfast."

"No, Tom!" her exclamation held such a

note of dismay that it swiveled Powlson about. "I haven't asked you to do anything you haven't done before. Call it justice if you will, but whatever it is, it's needed here now—terribly. If you won't kill Gaunt, you can at least listen to what we have to say, can't you?"

"You said that he roughed you up last night," the man on the ground cut in. "Did he or didn't he?"

"He didn't," she said. "I lied, Mike. It was the only way that I could get you to meet

"Man, she turned out to be fickle. She couldn't wait till I got done!"

him. I warned you not to try a gun with him, so I felt you wouldn't get hurt. I only wanted you to stop him, talk to him. You spoiled it by fighting."

"Women!" Mike groaned, shaking his head, bewilderment in his eyes. "Women!"

LOOKING back, Powlson realized that she had asked him for help last night, as any woman might grasp at a straw to aid a man she loved. Perhaps it had been his own strong attraction to her that had so aroused his resentment. Had it been any other woman, he might not have felt so badly tricked. He lowered the hammer on his gun.

"Talk," he said. "I'm listening."

"I was the foreman of the Falcon," the man said, "and they were losing beef. I tried my damnedest to find out how and where. I worked the crew to death, until they all hated me, but no soap. Then one night I got what I thought was a break, a note slipped into my bedroll that told me if I went into Blue Buttte Pass alone at midnight, I'd find Falcon beef being rustled. I had hardly gotten down among them when Jernsted showed with his whole crew. I was charged with rustling, jailed, broke out, and here I am."

"The note," Ida Casternack said, "was a phoney. I know it."

"I could have ridden out of the country," Mike said, "but Ida was still working at Falcon. She stayed on to see what she could dig up. She's been meeting me once a week, at night."

Powlson was listening, and he was remembering where he had seen Art Gaunt before. Put whiskers back on him and let his hair grow long, and he'd be as familiar as a rattlesnake. That's why he seemed so determined to have me move on, Powlson thought—he was afraid I'd recognize him, even without the whiskers and with all the years that have passed. That much was clear, but there were other details here that were puzzling.

Powlson asked, "I noticed how the men at the ranch acted around you, Ida, why? They were afraid—of whom?"

"Gaunt," she said, and there was loathing in her voice. "He has a reputation as you have a reputation, whether you call yourself Powlson or Bellamy. They knew he was a killer and they knew, I think, that he framed Mike. Gaunt knew that Mike would never let him touch me, and that I loathed him. That's why Mike was framed, to get him out of the way."

"Maybe," Powlson said slowly. "But there's more to it than that. The note was in Mike's handwriting."

"How did you know?" the girl cried out, wide-eyed. "I didn't tell you that."

"He didn't need to be told," Art Gaunt said, and there he was, parting the bushes, stepping out, his gun leveled at Powlson's waist. "I had a hunch you'd remember me, Bellamy, from Texas days."

Powlson didn't move a muscle. He re-

mained squatted by his bedrool, looking down the muzzle of Gaunt's gun. "It all fell into line," he said, "when I heard about that note. You never change your tricks, do you? Let's see now. You went by the handle of Bill Varney, down in Texas. Some of the boys called you San Antonio Slim. Others called you a snake."

"Why change my style?" Gaunt said, and the sardonic smile moved over his face again. "It always works."

"Not this time," Powlson said. "This time you hung around too long. You were made a fool of by a woman. You stalled your game on account of Ida, not daring to end it and take her with you as long as Mike was prowling the hills."

Mike made a rumbling sound in his throat, then started to get up, anger in his eyes.

"Careful, Mike," Powlson warned. "Gaunt is fast with that cutter, and he's as cold-blooded as a snake."

"I'm glad to see that you appreciate me," Gaunt said softly. "And why do you think I've waited too long?"

"I wasn't here yesterday," Powlson said simply. "But I'm here now, and I'm going to stop you this time."

"Now you know, Mike," Ida Casternack said, "why I tried to hold this man here. He's going to stop Gaunt."

"How," Gaunt queried, his gun steady in his hand, pointed at Powlson's belly. "Tell me, how?"

It was something to chill the blood, these two men, one standing, his gun drawn and ready, the other squatted at ease, his gun in its holster. The girl looked at Powlson, remembering all the deeds that she had heard credited to him, and suddenly she found that she had no faith in the stories. He was in a hopelessly inferior position, with all the odds favoring Gaunt. Yet she knew that he was going to try, and every fiber of her being cried out against the risk.

"No, Tom," she cried, "Don't try it!"

"He won't," Gaunt said dryly. "There are two of my men in the brush behind him."

"That's an old trick," Powlson said contemptuously.

Maybe there were two men behind him, but what of it, he thought. What good was a drifter like himself when weighed against a couple who would settle down together, build a home, and rear children to carry on after them? That is, they would without Gaunt around. No man dies so fast that he can't send a bullet on its ways before he drops.

Gaunt saw what lay in Powlson's eyes. "Come out, boys," he called. "This fool is going to try it."

Powlson heard the crackling in the brush behind him, the dry chuckle, and he half turned and saw the two men, Gaunt's old sidekicks from Texas days. He recognized Shorty Buell, looking shorter and more bow-legged than ever, and Baldy Camp, with his hard eyes, drooping jowls and flowing mustache.

"I know this skunk." Buell spat. "He poked his nose into my business once before."

"He's always following us around," Camp complained.

"I didn't follow you around this time, Baldy," Powlson told him. "I was merely riding through. When I came to a loud smell, I knew you must be somewhere about."

"Let me button his lip with a slug," Camp growled.

"All together," Gaunt said tightly. "Then there'll be no mistake."

THEY meant it. It occurred to Powlson that if he meant to talk, to let Ida and Mike know the score, he'd better talk fast. If he went down before he talked, his death would do them no good; the trio would kill Mike too. But Gaunt wanted Ida, and he'd have a hard time with her if she knew the truth.

"Listen to me, Ida," he said. "Gaunt is an accomplished forger. What he pulled on Falcon he's pulled in other places. He hires out to a ranch and, being a good cattleman, does such an outstanding job he's respected by the owner. Then he starts rustling off stock, with the aid of these partners of his. He cleans up, then puts suspicion on someone else, in one way or another, by forging their handwriting. In Mike's case he had a double purpose, to frame Mike for the thievery and to get Mike out of the way so he could make time with you."

Gaunt's gun came up, and his eyes were

wicked. "I should have let you have it," he said, "before you said all that. Take him, boys!"

Ida Casternack screamed and latched onto Gaunt's arm. His bullet gouted up earth at his feet. He sidestepped, attempting to get her out of the line of his fire, and Mike tipped forward on his toes, catapaulting his body to grasp Gaunt around the ankles. Powlson rolled aside and twisted about, taking dirt in his face from a bullet from Buell's gun. Mike had Gaunt's gun-arm wrist locked now, and one brawny hand was at his throat. He lifted the foreman, shaking him like a terrier would a rat. Gaunt gave a scream of terror.

Baldy Camp brought the long barrel of his Colt down on the back of Mike's head as Powlson fired from the ground. Dust kicked up from the front of Shorty's shirt. The slug drove Buell back, and Powlson fed him two more before he hit the ground. Mike was on his knees, now, shaking his head, trying to rise.

Camp made another slash at Mike with his gun barrel, evidently momentarily forgetting his danger from Powlson in a fit of wild rage. Powlson yelled as he jumped toward the bald man. As Camp turned, Powlson shot him squarely between the eyes. Afterward, he could find no sign of Ida Casternack. He was running toward his horse when the girl burst from the brush.

"Tom!" she cried. "Mike! Are you all right?"

Mike was on his feet now, wiping the blood from his scalp with a trembling hand, still dazed, reeling in his tracks. Then, looking toward Ida, gladness and understanding came to his face. She ran sobbing into his arms. Powlson looked away, hearing the sound of rapidly receding hoof beats. Gaunt had taken advantage of his chance to get away. Powlson ran to his gelding, slashed the picket rope, leaped on bareback, dug in with his heels, and sent the startled animal plunging after Gaunt.

Two nights later found Powlson camped on the banks of the Little Missouri River, east of the Montana line. He ate beans and biscuits, then rolled up in his soogans, and lay looking up at the stars. Smoke drifted slowly from the dying embers of his cooking fire, a dull glow in the blackness of the night. An owl called mournfully from a butte side, and the water in the stream made a musical whisper in the scrub cedars. Then Powlson heard an alien sound—a stealthy footfall, a faint rustling in the sage. He froze.

"The stars," Ida Casternack said, "are awfully close tonight, Tom."

His grip on his gun relaxed. "Yes," he said. "They're my friends."

"I tried to follow you," she said, "but you rode too fast. I lost your trail in the badlands. Then I cut across country and picked it up again. At first I thought it might be Gaunt's trace and I was afraid, and then when I saw your fire I crept close."

"Why did you come?" he asked, sitting there in his blankets, looking up at her. "I never expected to see you again."

"You left without your saddle and bedroll," she said, "but I see you have both now."

It was a question, and he answered it. "They're Gaunt's," he said. "He won't be needing them any more."

She was on her knees now. A knot exploded in the fire and Powlson saw her face in its light. Her lips were twisted into that soft smile that hit a man where he lived.

"Why wander any more, Tom?" she asked. "You don't have to. You've never done anything that put the law on your trail. I always knew that, no matter what I said."

"A man needs more than the stars to make him stop wandering. I told you that at Falcon," he said.

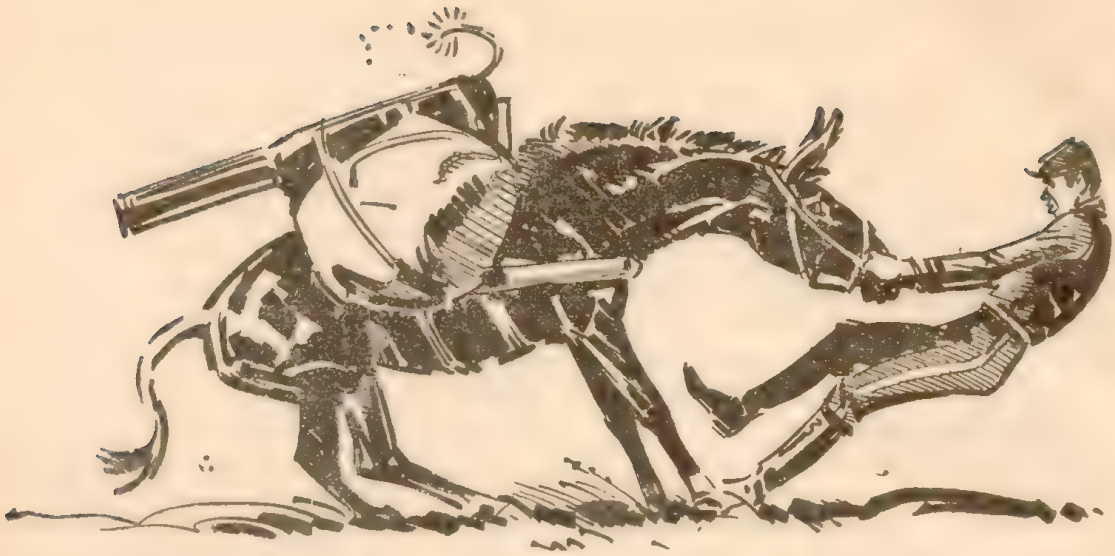
"Couldn't you love me, Tom?" she asked, her lips close to his. "Couldn't I be the woman you need?"

He said, "What about Mike?"

"He's my brother," she told him. "You'd like him, really, if you knew him as I do."

"I like him now," Ross Powlson told her.

He knew that he was being roped in, but somehow he didn't care. A rope around that section of land he knew about, along the Powder River, wouldn't be half bad, under the circumstances. Powlson knew that at long last he was going to settle down. It was a nice thought.



A MULE AND A MOUNTAIN GUN

AS A demonstration designed to impress and entertain the gathered tribes, there could be no doubt the afternoon was a huge success. The fact that at the height of the festivities the Indians could have taken Fort Benton without even a warwhoop was something no one present, lease of all the Indians, realized. If they had chosen to do so, Montana history would have had to be revised, and historians would have had to give considerable space to a mule and a mountain howitzer.

That spring day in the early 1860's, Fort Benton was crowded as never before. In addition to the regular garrison and fur company factors, the pack trains were in with the winter's take of pelts, and half a dozen steamboats lay at the docks unloading. Mountain men and sailors jammed every bar and boarding house.

There was big brass on hand too—an inspection team of high-ranking Army officers, three or four managers from the head offices of the fur companies out to check the books and the operation of their posts, and a number of dignitaries from the Indian Bureau, accompanied by an escort of lesser regional bigwigs. These latter were out to sign another brand-new treaty with the Five Nations of the Sioux.

If the fort was crowded, conditions outside its stockade were no better. Here were pitched the camps of thousands of Indians, summoned to the fort by the Indian Bureau for the ceremony of treaty signing.

On the afternoon in question, a large pack train from an outpost was sighted. It was a

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A True Story by
T. J. KERTTULA and
D. L. McDONALD

heavily-armed outfit, for it had had to pass through hostile territory, and the most impressive item of its armament was a brand-new mountain howitzer, a highly polished brass three pounder.

This was too good an opportunity to miss, not only to demonstrate to the fur company officials the efficiency of the Army escort service, but also to impress upon the Indians the power of this new smoke stick to enforce the mandates of the Great White Father in Washington. Messengers were sent out to summon the Indians to the stockade's main gate.

Several thousand onlookers—Indians, Army officers, trappers, Indian agents, fur company officials, soldiers off duty, sailors, and saloon bums—turned out to watch the demonstration. It was an impressive gathering, and probably the largest ever crowded into one small area in that section of the West.

The mule loaded with the howitzer was led in and, through an interpreter, the Indian Bureau big brass dwelt on the wonders of the new weapon and explained what they proposed to do. The Indians were pleased and intrigued, though it is doubtful if they had much idea of what it was all about. The high clay bluffs on the other side of the Missouri were selected as a target, because the shot had to land far away to make it really impressive. The bluff was excellent for the purpose, for a shot would raise a dramatic cloud of yellow dust and, if they were lucky, it might bring down a part of the cliff into the Big Muddy.

The little gun was mounted on a swivel bracket so the barrel could be raised, lowered, swung around or quickly dismounted from the packsaddle. Pockets on the saddle carried powder and ball for a round or two, and additional pack animals brought up the rest of the ammunition.

For the time, and considering frontier conditions, it was a compact and efficient piece of artillery, if the target held still long enough to get the gun into action. Dismounting the weapon, turning the pack animals over to horse holders to be led back, and so forth, was somewhat too time consuming when the target was as elusive as the swift-moving Sioux.

On the move, the barrel of the little cannon was tied down so it pointed back over the rump of the mule. There was a theory—so far unproved—that, due to the rocklike stance of a balky mule, the gun could be unlimbered and fired effectively right from the animal's back. The big dun mule packing the piece that day was a famous balker. If speed in operating the weapon was what the big brass desired, speed was what they'd get, the gun crew agreed.

The mule was led into the center of the parade ground, with the white men gathered between it and the river, and the Indians on the landward side. The packmaster aimed its rear end at the bluff. Grasping the cheek pieces of the bridle with both hands, he gave a couple of quick jerks, followed by a steady pull. The mule reacted as it generally did, stubbornly refusing to move out of his tracks. The packer swore and jerked the cheek pieces a couple more times, and the mule's legs stiffened rock hard.

"All right, boys, he's balking," the packmaster shouted. "Load up the gun."

"Make it impressive," one of the Indian Bureau officials said importantly.

"He wants a big boom," the packmaster translated, and the gun crew rammed another charge of powder home.

"Touch her off!"

The gunner applied the light. The fuse sputtered momentarily and then began to hiss. Everyone but the packer, who had braced himself to hold the mule, stepped back to watch the effect on the bluff—and on the Indians.

FOR the first time the mule began to pay attention to the activities around him. At the hiss of the fuss his ears came back, then flipped forward inquiringly, then lay back against his neck. Then he unbalked. Attempting first to run back, he was stopped by the packer's weight, as that worthy dug his heels into the ground and held.

"Whoa, there, you thus-and-so," the packer bawled, but the mule wasn't whoaing.

Unable to back out from under its hissing load, the animal began circling sidewise, letting everyone have a good look at the size of the howitzer's bore as the muzzle swung past them. Even for a three pounder, it seemed impressive.

On the second time around the soldiers,

trappers, and every other white man, had had enough, and with wild yells they plunged over the bank into the river.

Only the Indians held their ground, thoroughly enjoying the show. Having only a faint idea of what it was all about, it was, they presumed, going according to plan. So engrossed were they in the display that they failed to realize that the entire personnel of Fort Benton was in the water, and the fort could have been the Indians', just for the effort of walking in.

Frantically the packer, the only white man left in sight, fought to control the struggling mule. He didn't have any illusions as to what would happen to him if the ball plowed its way through the massed warriors.

Instead of calming down, the mule grew wilder. Knowing that the only safe place was directly in front of the animal, the packer gripped the cheek pieces and held on grimly. The mule reared, lifting him off his feet, its sharp hoofs lashing out as if to paw away the man who held it under this hissing thing.

Higher and higher it rose, attempting to go over backward and crush its load—a trick at which most mules are adept. Just as it reached the vertical there was a terrific roar and a cloud of smoke. A geyser of dirt rose high in the air.

Caught off balance, the mule was catapulted forward by the gun's recoil and landed on its head. Its neck buckled and it rolled over on its side. Struggling, it rolled over once again and then groggily climbed to its feet. The packer, thrown violently aside, slid to the feet of the nearest Indians.

The noise, the smoke, and the spouting dirt only added to the Indians' enjoyment of the show. Their whoops of delight reached a crescendo when the mule began to buck as soon as it regained its feet.

Finally, apparently concluding there was no percentage in this, the mule stopped to take stock. The main thing it wanted was to get away from there—far away. With the Indians hemming it off from the open prairie, it chose the only open route, and went crow-hopping off toward the river.

The Indians rushed forward and lined the river bank to watch the renewed action, as the dignitaries shed their last vestiges of aplomb and wallowed and splashed out of range of the thrashing hoofs of the now thoroughly confused mule. The red men whooped with glee; surely the Great White Father had given them a marvelous show!

Mostly by accident the mule managed to work itself out of the mass of struggling men into the quieter waters farther out in the river. Calming down, it began to swim. Soon the current caught the animal, sweeping it downstream.

No one bothered to watch the mule once they were certain it wasn't coming back. With as much dignity as they could muster, the white men crawled out of the stream. Slipping and sliding, they managed to claw their way up the steep bank and disappear in the direction of their quarters.

The Indians, seeing that the show was over, reluctantly dispersed. They went off chuckling, still not aware that the performance they had enjoyed wasn't the one they had been invited to see.

Knowing there would undoubtedly be repercussions as soon as the assorted dignitaries had clothed themselves in fresh raiment, the packmaster and the gun crew, like the mule, faded from view.

It was days later before the Indians were again called together for the ceremony of the treaty signing, and even then chuckles rippled constantly along the poker-faced ranks as they watched the Great White Father's representatives move through the formalities.

Years later the brass cannon was found in the brush along the river bank, several miles below the fort. Its mount had finally torn loose from the packsaddle, probably as the result of another bucking spree. The gun was brought to Great Falls and used there for a number of years to add color to the Fourth of July celebrations.

No one, white or Indian, ever saw hide or hair of the mule again, dead or alive.

As for the Indians, they had their laughs that day—and then went on, treaty by discredited treaty, to virtual extinction. It was ironic they did not realize that on a certain day they might have changed history if they'd properly evaluated the surprise element in the Great White Father's demonstration of the efficacy of a mule and a mountain gun.

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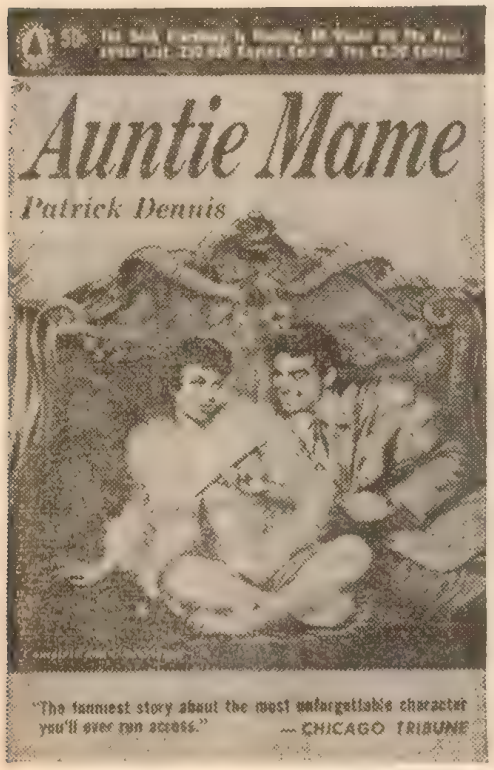
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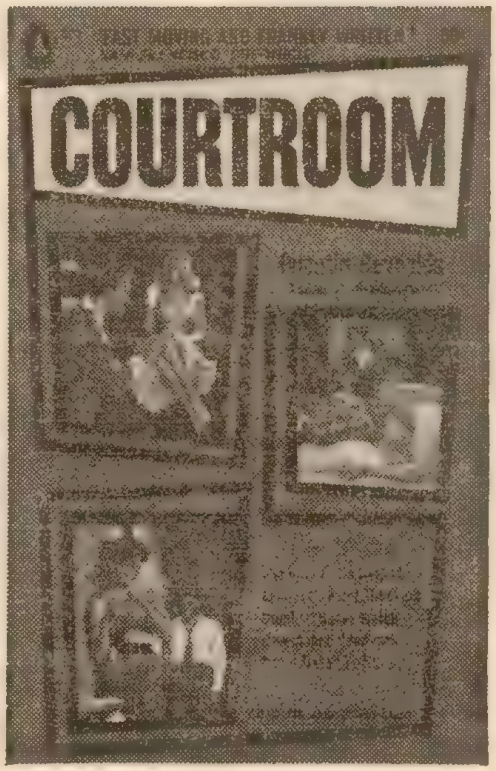

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"Looks like the guide's getting acquainted with your wife," Carver said.

The LONG and LONELY WAY

By PAT PFEIFER

JOHN STRANG pulled the new team to a stop in front of his neat cabin, and called his wife. When Abby did not answer, he strode around to the garden, knowing she would be there. The old irritation at her foolishness about flowers rose in him. She was on her knees beside her rosebushes, setting rose slips into a bucket of moist sand.

"Abby," he said sharply.

She looked up, her slender hands going out

♥ ♥ ♥

ABBY WAS MEEK, quiet, yielding . . . but somewhere inside her was the power to destroy a man to protect the thing she loved best

to the bucket defensively.

"We pull out for Independence tomorrow. Then we'll join the first train to Oregon."

Her reply disclosed neither enthusiasm nor regret. "I'm glad, if that's what you want, John."

He knew then that she looked on going with him to take up land in Oregon Territory as a duty, and that she would do it as she had molded her way of living to his wishes in their year of marriage. He'd made it clear from the start that he expected that from her, yet now he knew disappointment that she should feel this way.

John's good humor vanished completely as he nudged the bucket with his toe. "What's this piece of foolishness?"

"It's my keepsake," Abby said. "You said last night I could take a keepsake with me to Oregon."

"I thought you'd take something sensible, not a bunch of flowers that'll die before we get there."

"I've been sensible for a year," Abby cried. Pleading for an understanding she did not expect to receive, she came to her feet. "Oh, John, can't you see? I need something to hold to, something that needs me. I'm not strong like you. You don't need anything but yourself."

He clamped down on his temper resolutely. You had to be patient with a woman, he told himself.

"Now, Abby," he said, "you know they won't live, and we're crowded already. Besides, there are whole prairies full of flowers in Oregon."

Abby's head went back, the line of her slender throat arousing a queer admiration in John that he sternly suppressed. "I don't care. You promised."

"I said you could take something useful," John said.

"You promised," Abby repeated with gentle persistence.

Pride could be a man's destruction, but John prided himself on keeping his word. So, even though it sat ill with him to give in to Abby's strange willfulness, he nodded grudgingly.

"Take them, then," he said shortly. "Those spindly things'll soon die anyhow."

THE first gray wisps of morning fog closed about the deserted cabin in a ghostly embrace. Abby looked back, her eyes blurred, and John reached out and awkwardly touched her hand. She made no response, so he set his face toward Missouri, ashamed of his momentary softness. There would be no place for such sentiment on the long trail west.

The team soon settled into a slow, plodding gait that carried them across the interminable miles stretching westward to Missouri. The farms decreased with every day's journey, until time became intensified and lengthened by the empty world surrounding the crawling wagon.

A vast ocean of grass rippled in the ceaseless wind as it crept over rolling hills to meet an intensely vivid sky.

There was no relief from this overpowering solitude and it oppressed John strangely, as if the sky and land pressed against him with tangible weight.

For the first time he turned to Abby for companionship, but she was wrapped in a still absorption as impregnable as the wilderness around them. Her only concern was the bucket set carefully in the back of the wagon.

For the first time since their marriage, John felt a strange defiance with which he could not cope. He could not put it into words, but he knew that Abby, through these tiny stubborn plants that sucked sustenance from Ohio sand and refused to die, was pitting her will against his wishes.

Independence was more than a town, it was the jumping-off place to adventure. John rolled the name under his tongue as he saw row upon row of emigrant wagons camped near the town, waiting for the first grass to spring up alongside the Oregon Trail. It meant feed for the stock—and starting time. He stopped his weary team with a flourish, and with a rare gallantry swung Abby down over the wheel.

She protested, but her eyes were bright, and John knew he'd pleased her. Trying to please her was a new idea; it made him feel good. He'd have to think about the matter. Maybe silliness like that was what it took to make a woman happy.

"I'm going down the line," he told her,

"to find out when a train starts for Oregon." Feeling generous, he said gruffly, "You come too. But let the men do the talking."

Abby shot him a demure sidewise glance as she tucked her hand under his arm. What he saw in the look heated up the back of his neck. "Certainly, Mr. Strang," she said.

John estimated that there were more than a hundred wagons scattered over the flat. He saw a crowd gathered around a knoll, listening to a stout, red-faced man haranguing them. Joining the people, John and Abby listened as Mr. Carver promised them an abundance of wild game and fertile land.

The crowd was enthusiastic, and murmurs of approval swelled until one small, timid-looking man ventured the query, "What about Indians?"

Carver looked pained, and introduced Jim Llewellyn, a long, lean man, buckskinned and slouch hatted, who was to be the guide. Llewellyn did not bother to depose Carver from the stump he was standing on, but spoke calmly from the ground. The Indians in Oregon had learned their lesson when the murderers of the Whitman Massacre had been hunted down.

"As for the plains Indians," he assured them, "if you all join up we'll be strong enough so they won't try anything."

John unconsciously nodded his head at this common sense, and Carver pounced on him. "Here's the kind of men we need," he said. "Not men who refuse to do anything."

It was flattery, and John knew it, but he looked down at Abby and her face was full of wifely pride. His protest died in his throat, and he nodded helplessly as Carver proposed him as leader for a platoon of six wagons. He'd be responsible for seeing that they kept their place.

Looking at the other men, sturdy and sensible farmers like himself, he was reassured, until he thought of the timid little man whose name was Timkins. Timkins was the sixth member of the platoon.

That night the huge fire beckoned, and the lure of a fiddle drifted down to the wagons. John Strang, at peace with the world, yielded to Abby, and they joined the people around the flames. He'd decided that that was the way to handle her strange new attitude: give in to her on the small things, and she'd not argue about the big ones.

They sat on a log by the fire and watched the dancers. Then John wandered off. He'd never been one for small talk with a woman, anyhow. He was deep in conversation with Captain Carver, about conditions to the west, when Carver glanced over at Abby.

"Looks like Llewellyn's getting acquainted with your wife," he said casually.

John looked too. Abby was leaning forward intently as the guide, his face bronze in the flickering light, talked to her, his hands moving emphatically. Then she threw her head back and laughed freely, and John felt a twinge of anger shoot up his spine.

HE TRIED to ignore them, but found he could not. Abby was his wife, a married woman. She should have sent the man on his way, not encouraged him by laughing. Her laughter was bright and strange to John, and he was angry that this was so.

He stalked over to Abby. "We're leaving now."

The eagerness died in her at his tone. "Just as you say," she said slowly.

John looked back once. The guide was watching, an obscure amusement on his features. John waited for her to ask him what was the matter, but she walked beside him speechlessly. He told himself he would beat her at her own game, but his curiosity—he refused to acknowledge it as jealousy—trapped him.

"You must have had an interesting talk," he said suspiciously.

Abby gave him a strange new smile. "It wasn't much," she said lightly. "We talked about roses."

John grunted in disbelief, and Abby went on, "He told me about some women in another train he guided who brought slips to Oregon. So mine will be all right."

She smiled again, with that secret mirth, and John noted it with increasing rage. So this was what giving in to a woman's whims brought a man!

The wagon train lurched over the deep-cut ruts of the Oregon Trail, across the Missouri and along the Platte River. John Strang soon knew that the shiftless, timid Timkins was

the weak link in his platoon. He was always last.

When the wagons deployed into a defensive circle at night, Timkins never kept up to the wagon ahead. Llewellyn pointed this out at a meeting one night. That one gap would be all that the plains Indian would need. John writhed under the censure from the guide, but admitted the justness of the rebuke.

Then he did something plain foolish, and it was his distrust of Llewellyn that made him do it. He promised to see that Timkins kept up.

"Good," Llewellyn said curtly.

"The Timkins have no business on a trip like this," John said irritatedly to Abby when he got back to their wagon.

Abby, wakened by the thud of his boots on the floor boards, murmured sleepily, "Maybe it's all they have left to live for."

John snorted. "They're shiftless; they don't even have gumption enough to lift their own weight. Even if they get to Oregon, how'll they make out?"

"I think they depend on you," Abby said softly. She was silent for a long while, then went on, "It's hard for a strong person to understand how someone weaker needs help. The Timkins let life beat them, and now all they have left is each other—and the hope of reaching Oregon."

The strange night sounds of the prairie echoed on the ceaseless moaning of the wind, and John twisted restlessly. He forced his mind back to the Timkins.

"If they're beaten," he repeated stubbornly, "they have no business trying to reach Oregon."

Abby's sigh was a soft, discouraged sound in the darkness. She turned her back on John, and with her retreat there was nothing to hold back the desolation that seeped coldly into the wagon on the night sounds of the wind.

The monotony of travel began to tell on the people as the heat of June and July closed down. The responsibility as platoon leader thinned John's nerves. A fight broke out between two of the emigrants, and Llewellyn was in no mood for leniency. John found once more, to his surprise, that he agreed with the guide.

The stops at Fort Laramie and Green River relieved the tension, and John felt he could have relaxed if it weren't for Timkins. He put off talking to the little man until Timkins's scrawny lead horses gave out completely, one day on the trail. One look told John they could pull no more, and he scowled in futile anger at the defeated little man.

"Why didn't you tell me your horses were played out?"

Timkins drew his narrow shoulders up with the remnants of a tattered dignity. "Ma and I don't want charity," he muttered.

"We don't want to lose our scalps because one wagon can't keep up," John retorted brutally. "This is Indian country."

The dignity vanished, and defeat bowed Timkins's back once more. His eyes were pleading, and John despised himself for getting soft, but he said shortly, "Take two of my extra horses as a loan. You can pay me back when we get to Oregon."

He told Abby, when she asked him about it. It was her fault, anyway, for putting notions into his head.

Her eyes were soft. "That was fine."

"It was foolish."

THEY crossed the last sun-seared miles of prairie in late July. The Rockies flung themselves arrogantly into the sky, beckoning mockingly through the heat and dust to the west. They made dry camp for two nights, and Abby's lips parched and cracked as she walked beside John in the ankle-deep dust to spare the team.

Her strength waned rapidly, and he worried about fever, until he caught her pouring her small water ration around the roses still clinging to life in the back of the wagon. He forbade her to do it any more, but she was adamant, and he did not have the strength for once to do anything about her willfulness. He contented himself with stealthily pouring his water into her canteen, telling himself he'd make use of the fact next time she got independent.

Llewellyn scouted far ahead of the wagons in search of a stream that had not dried up. The thirsty oxen and other stock were chained to the wagon wheels at night, and their miserable bawling was a monotonous undercurrent.

By the miracle that guards fools and children, the Timkins made it over the sharp, winding trail that crossed the backbone of the Rockies. It wasn't until the train passed Fort Hall and reached the treacherous Snake River, well into Oregon Territory, that John's premonitions came true.

The wagons were floated across safely, but Timkins hesitated on the eastern bank. John took the reins from his indecisive hands. "I know the lead horses better, so I'll take 'em across for you. Is your heavy stuff balanced or fastened down good?"

Timkins nodded uncertainly.

The wagon floated sluggishly, twisting and tilting awkwardly from side to side. Like a whisper of warning, John heard a heavy sliding sound inside the box. A swift whirling current wrenched the wagon one way, another twisted it back, and with a sickening lurch the wagon turned over.

He felt the icy shock of the cold water, and fought helplessly as the current dragged him into the frenzied team, their hoofs lashing the water into spray. He heard encouraging shouts from close by. Then the tug of the water carried him against the horses, and the sullen roar of the river exploded in his head.

For what seemed like an age, John tossed and twisted, his aching body battered from side to side. He fought against the river and pushed to the surface. When he opened his eyes he saw dingy canvas. Abby's head was close to his, and he remembered.

"How'd I get out of the river?" His voice was a croak.

"Some of the men pulled you out." She pushed him back gently, and he fell flat as pain rushed through his body and settled in his leg and head.

"What's wrong with me?" John's alarm grew rapidly. He *couldn't* be badly hurt, not now.

"You have cuts on your head and leg." Abby's eyes flashed angrily. "That Timkins makes me furious," she snapped. "If he had any sense, he'd have fixed that wagon. You might have been killed."

John's wonder grew, mixed with a contentment that stole slowly through him. Abby was worried about him. It was a new sensation for a man who'd always prided himself on being self-sufficient. He grinned foolishly. It was weakness, but as he slipped back into a feverish sleep he grabbed for her hand. Every time he opened his eyes, Abby was still there, or her face soft as a summer sky.

John stared rebelliously at the canvas top of the wagon. For two weeks he'd lain flat on his back and listened to the noises outside that told of Abby and the men of the train doing things he should be doing. He'd been feverish for three days while Abby fought infection from the deep cut in his leg.

He looked restlessly out of the open flap of the wagon. The country had been monotonous, miles of sagebrush alternating with mountains and hills. Now the sky tilted as the wagon rumbled upward into the Blue Mountains.

The bluffs rose sheer on each side, crowding in closer and closer to the trail until the wagons had no room to spare. He could not see around Abby's back, where she sat on the wagon seat, and he tugged at the side lashings of the wagon top.

The bluffs were barren of vegetation and scarred with the marks of landslides. Their bases were littered with fallen boulders. John's apprehension grew as he looked upward to the tops, weathered and cracked from the wind. Here there could be no escape, if a slide started. John had never known the feeling of complete helplessness that gripped him now.

The wagons stopped as instructions were shouted down the line. Abby turned. "We're to go on one wagon at a time," she said. "Mr. Llewellyn says there may be a slide from here on."

Her face was still, but John felt cold sweat pop out on his forehead. He struggled up from the blankets, only to fall as his leg gave way. Abby climbed in beside him.

"What are you doing?"

"I've got to handle the team," he said hoarsely. "You can't do it."

Her lips curled. "I'm afraid I'll have to. Do you want me to have the men take you out until the wagons are past? They can carry you through."

John's temper rose. Did she think he was a coward? "I'll stay in here."

They sat in silence, listening to the faint rumble of each wagon going slowly through the slide area. Their wagon was last, and the

tension grew in John as his feeling of utter helplessness increased. Abby's hands twisted in her lap and she looked at him pleadingly, then turned away.

AT LAST she crawled through the flap and took the reins. The wagon inched slowly forward as the seconds crept by. John watched the ominous rim above, fighting down a panic made worse by its strangeness.

"We're halfway through," Abby said slowly.

John opened his mouth to answer her, but

"I bet old Joe could tell many an Indian story."

speech would not come, as he saw the faint trickle of sand gliding downward.

"Abby, the cliff!"

She looked upward, and her face whitened with horror as the trickle grew into a stream that swept slate and boulders relentlessly before it. She leaned forward and lashed frantically at the horses. They broke into a run, terrified by the noise of the slide that grew into an ear-shattering roar.

The wagon shivered and swayed as the churning wheels caromed off rocks. John could not tear his eyes from the ever-growing mass of stone that hung over them. A rock bounced through the canvas and glanced off his arm.

Then the horses were rounding a turn and burst into sight of the other wagons. The team was running away, and Abby hauled uselessly on the reins as the slide hit with a cracking roar that sent echoes crackling through the canyon.

The men on horseback stopped the team, and Abby sat in white-faced stillness on the seat. She was quite all right, she said calmly. Then she came into the wagon and sat on the floor and shook with a hysterical sobbing.

John heaved himself up on one elbow and pulled her yielding body to him tightly, trying to find something soothing to say.

Abby's crying slowed and she pushed back from him, trying to regain her composure.

"You'll think I'm a coward," she said, "but I was terribly scared."

John laughed wildly with relief from the strain. "I was too," he blurted. Then shame at admitting his weakness hit him.

Abby's eyes glowed as she sat back and looked at him. "Thank you for saying that," she murmured.

Her lips brushed his, and then she was back on the wagon seat. John lay there, weak from the after effects of his panic, strangely content at the thought of Abby's lips.

The way grew easier as the train jolted down the western slopes. John chafed at his helplessness as voices from outside came to him: Captain Carver's deep rumble, Timkins's apologetic whine, and another that made him vaguely uneasy.

A ray of the lowering sun streamed through the flap, and John rolled over and jerked it loose. The country outside was barren, covered with sagebrush marching in orderly rows to the yellow hills. Abby was tiredly unhitching the team when a tall man rode up and started helping. John's hands clenched with a sudden fierceness as he recognized the voice he'd heard so often.

His body tired under the strain of holding himself up, but he would not let go until his arms gave way. Then he lay there and let his imagination supply the details of a scene he could not see. He tried to blame Abby, but unwillingly he was remembering the times he'd done and said things without caring if he hurt her.

It was dark when she brought his supper to

him, carrying a lantern carefully in her hand. The wavering light etched her shadow on the canvas and touched her skin with ivory.

"Llewellyn must be a lot of help to you."

"Not only him. Captain Carver and Mr. Timkins have helped too."

"As much as Llewellyn?"

Abby faced him squarely. "No. I could have managed without his help, but it did make things easier."

John expected her to drop her eyes, but they were fearless. He was not sure. All he could do was wait while Llewellyn had a clear field with his wife. He dozed off in spite of his restlessness, and it was pitch dark when he woke again. His empty dishes were still by his side. He sat up hastily. Abby had not taken them.

He struggled to his feet and managed to crawl over the seat and lower himself to the ground. By hanging on to the wagon he hobbled around to the back. Abby was gone.

A sickness hit him, and he grabbed the tailgate. He could not go to find her. He choked back the thoughts that forced their way into his mind. He knew he could not even make it to the front of the wagon, and pulled himself awkwardly into the back end, going limp with pain as he hit his sore leg on the bucket of rose slips.

A new pain hit him as he looked at them, the tangible reminder of Abby's withdrawal from him. He was alone, with the feeling he'd had on the prairie, alone as he'd been when he was a boy and afraid of the unknown. The emptiness was too vast to shove away any longer.

It closed around him until he took refuge in the thought of Abby, and she pushed the loneliness back until he remembered—Abby, her head thrown back in defiance of him; Abby, laughing with Llewellyn at the campfire in Independence; Abby, somewhere now with Llewellyn in the night.

UNABLE to stand the waiting any longer, John sprang to his feet. He wanted to hurt something, and he picked up the bucket and hurled it from him. It bounced along the ground, the sand shattering and spilling out into the circle of light.

Then Abby stood at the wagon, her face stricken in the pale gleam of lantern glow. "Why did you do that?" Her voice shook.

"Now you can go ask Llewellyn how to grow some more," John raged, "like you did tonight, while I was supposed to stay in the wagon like a fool."

She was bewildered. Then loathing spread across her face. "You think I—" She stopped. Then her voice cut into his soul. "Mr. Llewellyn came and got me, yes—because Mrs. Jacobs got sick. I've been with her since sundown. He means nothing to me except as the man who pulled you from the river. And I wanted to spare your pride by not telling you!"

His anger faded into relief. "Then you don't love him?"

Abby laughed, and John winced, for the sound was mirthless. "Why are you worried about love? You don't want it, or me, or anything but yourself."

She ran into the darkness. John wanted to blame someone, but found only himself. At least she doesn't love Llewellyn, he told himself. But why should she care for me, after the things I've done? Dully, he stooped, in spite of the pain, scraped the sand back in the bucket, and replaced the slips, hoping they would live.

In the days that followed, John tried to tell Abby how he felt, but he looked at her face and could not find words. Her features were cold and closed, as if she'd shut her heart away someplace safe where he couldn't reach it to hurt her any more.

The land was bleak in the weak November sunshine when they reached The Dalles, end of the Oregon Trail. The train broke up there. John planned to load his wagon on a raft and reach Portland by way of the Columbia River.

He caught up with Llewellyn, who was standing to one side watching the activity. "I want to thank you for pulling me out of the Snake," he said determinedly. "I didn't know it was you for a while."

The guide smiled. "You'd have done the same for me." Llewellyn looked around and sighed. "This is my last trip. I'm getting married this winter, and my girl's already told me she won't have me gone nine months of the year."

Even though John knew now that there was nothing between this tall man and Abby, he felt relief as he wished Llewellyn good luck.

The Timkins joined them, broad smiles on their faces.

"We never would have made it without you, Mr. Strang," Timkins said.

"You helped us when I was hurt," John reminded him, wanting suddenly to make amends for the thoughts he'd had about the little man.

"Why, that's so," Timkins said, beaming. "I guess we all helped one another."

He strutted away, sure all at once that he had more than pulled his own weight. John's grin faded as he grappled with the feeling that there was a relationship between Timkins and himself and Abby.

They had all gotten through because they depended on each other's help. A man couldn't live by himself. With this knowledge, John realized that he needed Abby, who knew his strength and his weaknesses. For the first time he had to know that he had all of her, her heart and her love and even her bright laughter.

He hurried back to the wagon, wanting to tell her, but she was still shut away from him.

IT WAS that way even when the raft passed downriver to the western side of the Cascades, and the bareness of the slopes became crowded with the riotous color of maples and aspens against dark green firs. Here was a land richer even than Carver had claimed.

It wasn't until they left Portland, following a trail that wound through thick woods, that he found the courage to tell Abby he needed her. The wagon stopped in a natural clearing that sloped down to the Willamette River, where grass grew richly and thickly. It was the kind of homesite a man dreamed of, and he turned to Abby eagerly.

"How does this suit you?"

She shrugged. "It's your farm." She ignored his hand and climbed down, turning her back to him.

John stared at her, then gambled on his last chance. He hurried around to the back of the wagon and picked up a shovel, pulling the bucket of rose slips out. He held it to his chest because the bail had broken when he threw it, and silently thanked the Lord that the slips had not died.

"Abby." He stopped, fumbling for words. "I can't say it right, but I want to tell you I've been too big a fool to know how much I need you."

Her eyebrows rose. "As a housekeeper?"

John winced. He had that coming, but it still hurt. Then he looked down at the roses and found the courage to go on.

"No. The way I—the way a man—" he bogged down, then got angry. "No, blast it," he yelled, "the way a man needs a woman when he loves her like I love you."

He glared at her, the roses clutched stubbornly to him, and Abby's smile at the sight he made was swallowed up in a look of glory that came from deep within her. She took the bucket from him, and John, his eyes smarting, set the shovel to the ground and turned up the rich black earth. Abby went to her knees beside him and set the small plants into the Oregon soil.

Her hands reached out and closed over his, drawing him to her, and John knew that there was love between them as tender as the new grass along the trail, as strong as the land around them.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 71)

1. Left side.

2. Mexico.

3. Indian tribes.

4. Pelican.

5. Yes, maples grow in many mountain areas of the west, but more often as bushes or shrubs than like the maple trees of New England.

6. (1) John S. Chisum, cattle king. (2) John W. Hardin, gunman. (3) John Slaughter, Arizona sheriff.

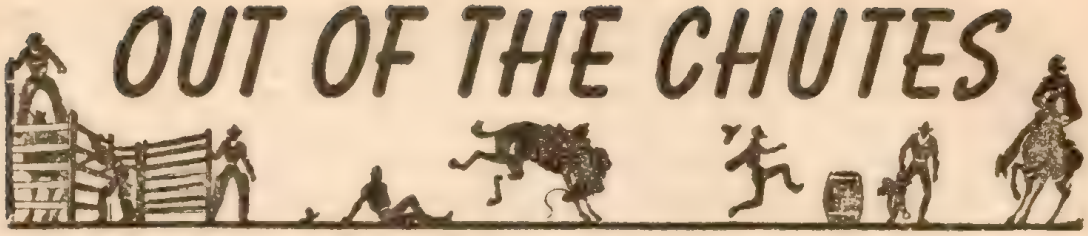
7. The horse wrangler.

8. Moab and Monticello, Utah; Cortez and Grand Junction, Colorado; Farmington and Grants, New Mexico.

9. Pancho Villa.

10. Western Writers of America.

OUT OF THE CHUTES



IN THE LAST issue we were describing an old-time rodeo as seen by contemporary reporters. Early day newspapers contributed a great deal to the rise in popularity of the sport. They announced coming contests in big headlines, and they described the action down to the last detail.

At a Denver rodeo held before the turn of the century, the crowds were so thick that the jerry-built bleachers kept collapsing and constantly had to be re-erected. But if the contests were half as thrilling as the local reporter made them, it's no wonder everyone risked life and limb to get a good look.

"Buck!" the reporter's story began, describing the ride of a cowboy named Bill Smith. "Buck isn't a name for it," he went on. "Up in the air and down with all four legs bunched stiff as an antelope's, and the back arched like a hostile wildcat's, went the animal. But the rider was there, and deep into the rowels he sank the spurs, while he lashed shoulders and neck with keen, stinging quirt. It was brute force against human nerve. Nerve won. A few more jumps and the horse submitted and carried the man around the corral at a swinging lope. It had all been done in seven and a half minutes. The crowd cheered, and an admirer dropped a box of cigars into the hands of the perspiring but plucky victor."

The same reporter described the steer-roping match with almost as much enthusiasm. "William Cook," he says, "made a marvelous catch and tie. Cook was attired in typical costume. He worked like a flash. His first throw caught the animal, and a sudden skillful turn of his horse brought the steer down. Cook was off and on the steer's back, and endeavored to force it over by main strength. The big fellow shook him off and made another dash. This time Cook caught him sure and made a quick and solid tie. One horn of the steer was broken by a fall when it went tumbling on its head."

That Denver rodeo, by the way, was probably the first to have a published prize list, a copy of which is still in existence. There were six contests, with one prize for each. Coming in second in those days was no more profitable than getting a goose egg.

Class 1—Catching, saddling, and riding a wild bronco. Prize for best time: $50.

Class 2—Roping and hog-tying a wild steer. Prize for best time: $50.

Class 3—Trailing a steer. Prize for best exhibition: $50.

Class 4—Roping a wild steer, by two men and stretching him out ready for branding. Prize for best time: $40.

Class 5—Foot-roping of cattle from horseback. Prize for best exhibition: fine silver water set, value $40.

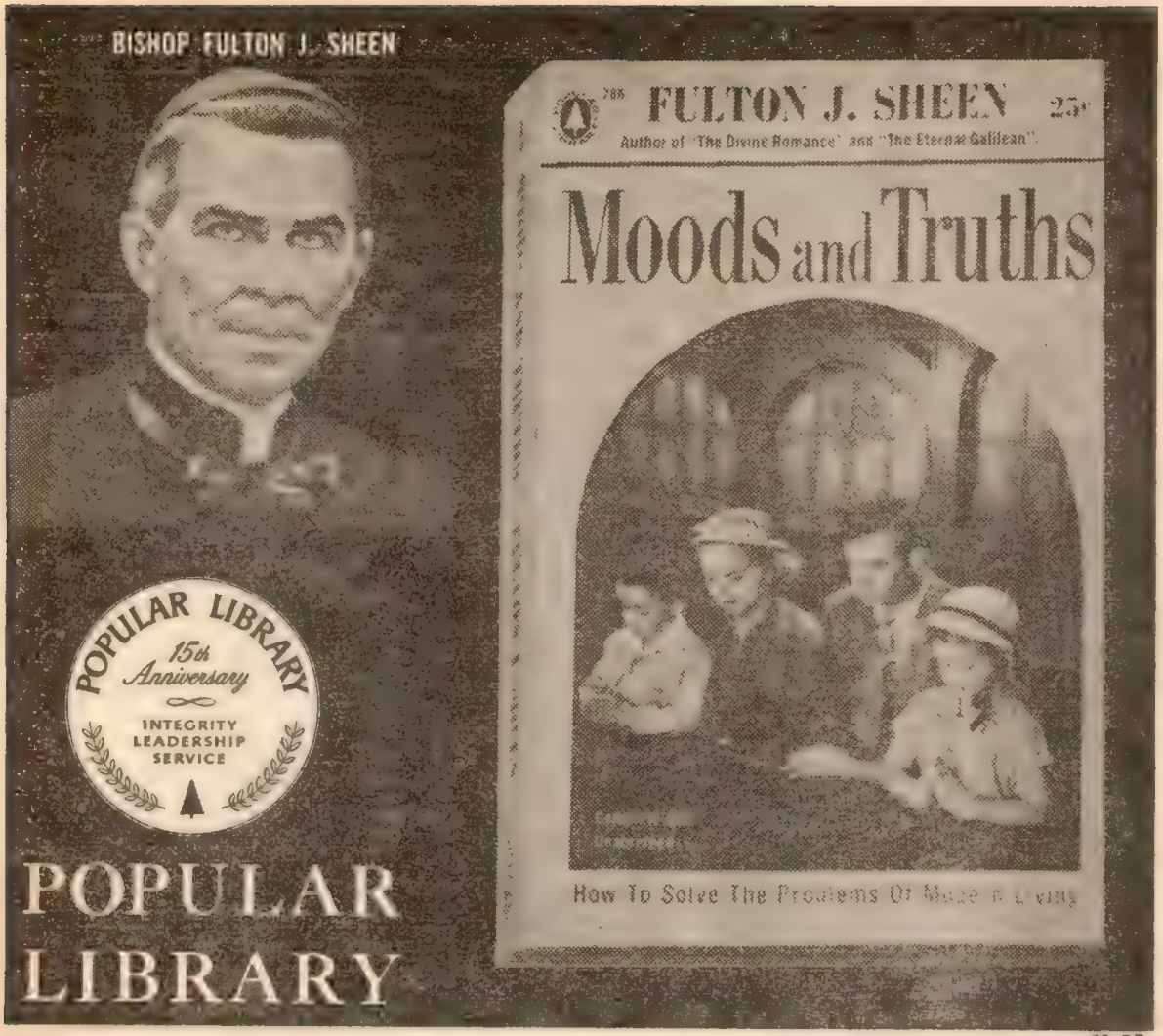
Class 6—Picking up twenty single potatoes by a rider going at a pace not slower than a lope. Prize for best exhibition: silver inlaid bit, value $30.

That potato-picking competition must have been rather lacking in excitement, because the reporter didn't think it worthy of mention in his story and it's certainly not an event that has survived the years on rodeo programs.

Those early contests were a far cry from today's well-organized, carefully regulated rodeos. Lovers of really violent action might be pardoned a sigh for the good old days.

Adios,

THE EDITORS



90 PR

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THE FRONTIER GENERAL STORE

a Fact Feature By BURTON L. WOLLENZEIN

THE first business to be established in a new frontier town was almost always the general merchandise store—or, as it was more commonly known, the "general store."

Such a store carried highly diversified stock, the quantity and variety of which was dependent on several factors other than the daily needs of the pioneers. Such limitations were created by the amount of money the owner was able to invest, the size of the building, and the limit to which the owner could stretch his credit.

In both the prairie and the mining towns, the pioneer merchant frequently arrived close on the heels of the homesteader and the gold hunters, bringing with him wagon-loads of supplies. After setting up a tent and making a counter from a few boards resting on top of some barrels, the merchant was ready for business.

The merchant generally did a brisk business right from the start, dispensing such items as salt, sugar, coffee, onions, rice, gold pans, picks, shoes, and whisky, to name a few. In many instances, the price of various items began to skyrocket as the miners and settlers continued to pour in. As an example, flour reached the fantastic price of forty dollars per hundred pounds in 1859.

The first general stores were usually started in tents, sod buildings, or even simple dug-outs. But it was not long before the typical small store blossomed out as a ten-by-twelve foot frame building, usually with a false front projecting above it like a signboard. As could be expected, a small store of that type was limited as to the quantity and variety of items it could stock.

Since the needs of the pioneers were many and varied, even the smallest store tried to stock as many items as possible—a condition which frequently created an overcrowded and untidy-looking establishment. The store-keeper and his family quite often were forced to set up their living quarters in

the rear part of the building, sharing space with the extra stock which could not be placed on the shelves up front.

It was almost impossible to keep the stock and the interior of the store clean. During the dry seasons, clouds of dust blew into the building. When it rained the customers brought in huge gobs of mud from streets which were veritable quagmires.

Not all general merchandise stores were very small, though. Some of the larger ones had such added refinements as hitching rails and loading platforms, and sheds out back where they kept such large items of stock as plows and wagons. Some of them added the little customer consideration item of supplying a shed where the customer could stable his horse while he shopped.

Prior to the arrival of stores which specialized in one or more lines of merchandise, the typical general store was truly a shopping center in one building. Within their limitations of size and financial backing, the general store was a grocery store, a hardware store, a haberdashery, jewelry store, dry goods store, drugstore, candy store, and a place where one could purchase boots, shoes, crockery, books, stationery, and tobacco or snuff.

The first storekeepers on the frontier considered groceries to be of little value, profitwise. They were thought of as being in the class of leader items, useful as a means of getting customers into the store, where they might see and buy items which gave the merchant a higher rate of profit. Because of this, the merchant frequently sold groceries at a price just slightly above his cost.

Meat was seldom offered for sale in the general merchandise store. People living in the towns generally purchased their meat at a butcher shop. The ranchers and farmers did their own butchering, or had a professional do it for them. When a town grew large enough, the work was generally done at a slaughterhouse.

Fresh fruit and vegetables could not be obtained at the store. What stock they did carry was always in dried form. In those days anything and everything which could be dried was prepared that way. Dried peaches, apples, beans, corn, berries, and other fruits and vegetables were readily available.

Canned goods was another unavailable item, for a number of years. But it is doubtful if they would have been much in demand, even if they had been obtainable in frontier stores. Far too many people held to the belief that food which had been in a can for some time might be "poisoned."

WHISKY was a staple item in the frontier general store, and was frequently kept in a tub or barrel. The customer acquired his drink by dipping it out in a cup. Not only was there a great demand and a substantial profit in that popular thirst quencher, but the storekeeper soon discovered it had another use.

Money was scarce on the frontier and, because of that, a major portion of the store's business was conducted through barter. The settler paid his bill by trading furs, buffalo hides, tallow, or farm produce, for the items he had purchased. This naturally led to considerable haggling and dickering over prices and the value of merchandise being given in trade. The storekeeper discovered that by supplying the customer with a free drink or two, he could generally eliminate the customer's tendency to haggle over prices.

Even the smallest frontier store found it necessary to carry a substantial supply of calico in stock. Selling at from five to nine cents a yard, the printed cotton cloth rapidly replaced homespun as the popular frontier garb. The women liked it because it was gayly colored, cheap, fairly durable, and could be used the year around. The store was usually a busy place when word got around that a new shipment of calico prints had arrived. The storekeeper built up his supply of eggs and butter, in exchange for calico and possibly an attractive sunbonnet to go with the new dress.

The arrival of a shipment of supplies at the general store was always a source of interest to everyone in the area. People who lived as lonely a life as did the early pioneers were as eager as children to see the latest and newest things from the East. No sooner had the merchant unpacked his shipment than he was beseiged by people who wanted to handle

and admire all the new and pretty things. But many of them could only hope that some day they would be able to afford such pretty clothes or such a fine piece of machinery.

Another time when the merchant had a considerable number of customers was in the early spring, when his supply of almanacs arrived from the various medicine companies. They were usually placed on the counter, and were available to all, free of charge.

People found them interesting reading, a fact which is not surprising in a place where there was always a hunger for something to read. These almanacs and other medical pamphlets did contain a variety of useful and useless information, though their primary purpose was to extoll the virtues of their particular medicines or spring tonics.

The storekeeper who was able to secure the government mail contract considered himself very fortunate. Being made postmaster and having the postoffice in his store did not bring in much income, but it helped greatly to draw people in the store, and therefore to increase the sale of merchandise. It was an excellent opportunity for the merchant to wean business away from competing establishments. For this reason a merchant often went to great lengths in his attempt to secure the mail contract.

The general store was a sort of rallying point for everyone in the area which it served. This was particularly noticeable if the store also contained the postoffice. People picked up their mail, then stopped to chat a while with friends and neighbors. When the drummers from the various wholesale supply houses arrived in town, they invariably stopped in to check on their mail. The same thing applied to people just moving into the area.

The town loafers generally gathered in front of the store during most of the year. In the winter they sat around the red-hot stove, whittling, chewing tobacco, and discussing the weighty problems of the day.

The prairie farmer had little time for such idleness. However, when he did come into the store he always found time to enjoy a short chat with the boys of the "hot-stove league," before starting out on the long dreary journey back to his isolated farm.

If the weather turned bad and it seemed unlikely that he would be able to reach his farm before dark, the farmer would wisely decide to stay in town for the night. As he could not afford to pay for a room at the hotel, he would sleep on the floor of the general store, under a blanket supplied by the storekeeper.

SOME of the merchants were rather mercenary in their dealings with the pioneers, and others engaged in such sharp practices as dilution, misrepresentation, and adding cheap fillers to more expensive bulk products. But the average storekeeper was essentially honest. Like the pioneer farmers, gold seekers, and ranchers, the pioneer merchant soon realized that mutual trust and cooperation was necessary between everyone on the frontier.

Some of the merchants lost, or came close to losing, their businesses because they were too helpful and too trusting. If a farmer had a bad year, or if his crop failed, the merchant frequently supplied him with seed for a new crop, and food for his family, "allowing as how he could pay for it when he harvested the new crop."

If the crop failed again, or sickness hit the family, the merchant generally had to write the bill off as a loss.

Many of the larger stores did a tremendous amount of business, particularly during the peak years of the westward emigration. They did this in spite of increasing competition in the form of additional general stores, and a gradually increasing number of stores which specialized in certain types of merchandise.

The specialty stores were neater in appearance, and a greater variety was available in their particular line of merchandise. The specialty store could also buy and sell more reasonably, because of quantity purchases.

On the other hand, the old general store was an interesting place, with its cluttered shelves, and its use of nearly every inch of space, including the ceiling, for displaying merchandise. It was a place where the pioneer could enjoy browsing, even if he could not afford to buy anything.

The old general store was truly the heart of the frontier area it served.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

FEB. 19 — MARCH 20

THE PISCES GIRL

ON MARCH 2, 1861, when the Sun was passing through the Sign Pisces, the Nevada and Dakota Territories were first organized. This same Piscean date almost thirty-years earlier saw the birth of Texan independence, and even today the sons and daughters of our largest state celebrate this memorable date as Texas Independence Day.

Anyone with Sun in Pisces is concerned with personal independence, although Mr. Pisces is apt to be rather paternalistic where the basic wishes of others are concerned. This is because Pisces is naturally intuitive as well as humanitarian, and feels that Pisces knows what is good for others.

The Pisces girl is the quiet type. "Still waters run deep," says the old adage, and this can be applied in its fullest sense to Miss Pisces. She is a deep thinker, a lover of beauty, quietude, even solitude. She knows what she wants out of life and gets it without much fuss or fury. People are inclined to give in to her quiet whims.

When she marries, she prefers a quiet, homespun man who is interested only in the deeper values. She likes a man to have a strong religious bent. She wants children, and imparts her ideologies to them quite readily. She runs a happy home of laughter, secure ideals, and good fun.

Mr. Aries, Mr. Leo, and Mr. Aquarius are a little too ambitious for her. Too often, she feels, they get away from basics and deal too much in theories. She is strongly attracted to Mr. Taurus, Mr. Scorpio, and Mr. Capricorn. Gemini, Virgo, Libra, and Sagittarius can do much to contribute the creative imagination and hardy, jovial balance she requires to make her happy.

You may receive a personal reading by sending this coupon to Professor Mari in care of Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE. (Canadians enclose three cents instead of stamp.)

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TROUBLE on the BRAZOS

By WILL C. BROWN

THE STORY SO FAR: TRAV PARKER finds JACK HINTON, one of the men he suspects of once having shot him and stolen his money. But before he can question Hinton, news of an Indian attack sends Trav, Hinton, Hinton's daughter MARY, and Trav's friend ROTAN, fleeing to the nearest town, which is run by JUDGE DENVER SMITH. Because the attacking Indian chief turns out to be his old friend BLUE KNIFE, Trav is able to prevail on him to stall off the attack. In gratitude, the judge extends his hospitality to Trav, but does not really

trust him. While Trav goes off to negotiate with the Indians, the judge puts Mary in jail to question her about Trav. Meanwhile the judge's wife, WILDA, has warned Trav he is in danger, and asks him to run away with her. Frightened, Rotan pulls out. On his return from the Indian camp, Trav tries to rescue Mary, but is knocked out by the jail guards.

PART THREE

THE guard in the passageway was a fat man with sleepy eyes and a half-moon of whiskers, sitting his life out watching the barred doors of the two cells. The lamp cast a wobbling light on him, without denting very much the gloom of Trav's cell.

When Trav opened his eyes and sat erect on the floor, the guard looked at him dully. Trav steadied himself with fingers spread against the stone wall. He fought against the flames in his head, where the guard had clubbed him down.

A voice came from the next cell, sounding surprisingly close. "Is that Trav Parker?"

He recognized the voice. It was Mary Hinton. Desperately, he knew he must have information from her, here and now. "Mary, do you remember, at your cabin, what I wanted to know? Would you tell me now?"

Her voice was little more than a whisper. "Please! Not here."

"It may be my last chance."

"No. Be careful, Trav."

"Shut up!" the guard muttered.

"Mary, will the judge let you out of here? Are you going to be safe? Tell me!"

"I don't know, Trav. I think so."

"What are they asking you? Is it about the thing I came to your house to find out?"

"Damn your blathering! I said be quiet!" The guard shifted and half sat up straight. He reached pudgy fingers out to adjust the lamp wick.

"Where's Raffer?" Trav asked him.

"He'll be here. Don't you worry. So'll Guerra."

"Who's Guerra?"

"The man you nearly choked to death."

"Trav!" Mary's voice was huskily urgent. "If you get a chance, just any kind of a chance, please go! Leave here! That's the most I can do for you, tell you to leave."

Trav abruptly asked the guard, "What's your name?"

He had barely heard Mary. A dove had called twice from somewhere outside, soft, slow, and mournful, with three little short, fading low notes at the end, each time.

"My name's Bumble. If you like it, go lie down and shut up."

"Bumble?" Trav raised his voice loud in surprise. "I've heard that name. Bumble—Bumble."

"Yeah. Like a damn bee. And I'm going to sting you if you don't quit jawing."

Trav raised his voice. "His name is Bumble, Mary! Do you know Bumble?" On the last word, he turned his head to face the outside door of the hallway.

Mary spoke sharply. "Don't push him, Trav! You don't know these people!"

He heard the dove call, an innocent sound. The gray gloom in the window had lightened a little. It couldn't be, he argued to himself. The muted notes were in his throbbing head. A heavy hand rattled the barred door that was out of sight at the end of the passageway.

"Bumble! Hey, Bumble! You awake?"

The guard brought his chair sharply down to its front legs and began the motions of dragging himself to his feet. The voice at the front door said, "Raffer sent me to relieve you."

Bumble shuffled down the hallway and out of sight. Straining on his ears to listen, Trav heard the swing of iron hinges. Maybe I'm dreaming, he thought. The big rear section of Bumble came slowly into Trav's vision. His fat arms were raised. A sixgun seemed to protrude from his mammoth belly, handle end first. On the handle end was a fist. Trav knew the fist, and the arm, every detail of them.

The whole shadowy figure marching Bumble backward came full into the lamplight now. Trav could only hold on to the bars, wetting his lips, afraid to try to speak because words were soggy lumps in his throat. The face that seemed to propel Bumble ahead of it down the passage belonged to the ugliest man in Texas. But it looked plumb beautiful now.

The sixgun jabbed the fat belly. "There's your chair." Rotan pointed. "Have a seat."

Bumble sat. It was the thing he did best. He kept stretching his hands toward the roof while Rotan took his keys.

"Don't go anywhere," Rotan said conversa-

tionally. He nodded politely to Trav. "Ladies first, if you don't mind."

Trav grinned. "I don't mind at all."

Rotan lumbered unhurriedly to the adjoining cell door. The key worked. The door squeaked open. Mary came into Trav's line of vision. Her worried smile flashed to him, then vanished. She stood, trying to straighten the stray ends of her hair, while Rotan worked the key again.

Rotan mumbled, "Are you speaking to me?"

"I just want to say—" Trav couldn't think of a way to put it.

Rotan understood. "Two fools like us ought not to talk this early in the morning."

Trav grinned tightly at his partner. The old, creviced features wrinkled a little in a responding grin. Apologies were thus extended and accepted.

"Bumble would look better in that cell than you do," Rotan said. "Out yonder, back of the store, somebody's hitching a team to a wagon. The wagon is loaded with sides of beef and some stuff. I've been spying a little. The wagon has a cover on it. It's a good place for a girl."

Trav nodded. "We'll go to the Tonk camp." He spotted his gunbelt hanging on the wall of the corridor, retrieved it, then directed Bumble into the cell and locked the door.

"What do you want to do?" Trav asked Mary. "Where do you want to go?"

"I don't know."

"Then you'll go with me."

She started to speak. He knew with a surge of compassion that he was seeing the sad plight of a girl who simply had no place to turn, nobody to go to, and who now must place herself in his hands because of her helplessness to do anything else. She managed to move her chin a fraction for an affirmative. Unashamedly, she touched her forefinger to the corner of each eye to brush away tears.

AS THEY stood in that moment, in a little knot of general uncertainty, she showed with a small gesture a desire to say something when she could make the words come. Trav and Rotan waited.

"Just so I can come back before sundown for the—for my father's funeral."

"Would you like to go somewhere in the village now? Would Wilda Smith put you up? Could she take care of you?"

Her breath came out in a long sigh. "Not Wilda. Not her."

Trav moved to the door, still half open, the way Bumble had left it when he had heard Rotan call his name. Trav saw that the sky had lightened rapidly. The settlement would be astir in no time. The people forted in the houses probably were already at the windows with their guns ready for an Indian attack.

"How about you?" he demanded of Rotan.

"I'm giving up ramrodding, as of now." His partner grinned sheepishly. "I did my little stunt. I hope I halfway made up for being a damn fool."

"How far'd you get?"

"About a mile. I turned around right in the middle of a high lope, without the horse's feet touching the ground. It just hit me—what'n hell am I doing, riding off south by myself? I feel like a polecat about it; I reckon you know that. I traced some commotion down to this place, and here I am."

Trav dug a hand into the heavy shoulder. "You're no polecat, you're a dove. Would you listen to an idea?"

"Yep. I did enough talking last night to last me a lifetime."

"That's forgotten." Trav lowered his voice so that his words would not carry to Bumble. "There's a detachment of Rangers at Fort Belknap. That's where the North Fork of the Brazos runs into the main stream. There should be a man in charge there named Captain Small. It's three days of hard riding. Are you willing to try it?"

"I don't like riding off leaving you in a fix," Rotan protested. "I did that once too many times, this morning."

"This is different. It's our only chance, the way I see it. If you can find him, and Captain Small will listen to you, give him this message from me. Tell him that I'm here, I think I've found the answer to why Texas is bogged down at the Brazos, and that this job needs the Rangers. You tell him the Union cavalry at Fort Concho is pigheaded blind to what's up here, we'll get no help out of that barracks. They're content just to watch the Comanche trails into Mexico, that's all. You'll just have to tell him what we've found.

"If they want to put a stop to this *comanchero* trade, tell him we've found the champion *comanchero* of them all up here above the Cap Rock. Tell him he can open a country half as big as the rest of Texas, while the Yankee Army is twiddling its thumbs, if he wants to. I think he will listen to you."

Rotan nodded. "You don't have to worry about how I'll lay it on. Anything else?"

"You might say this to Captain Small, if my name doesn't mean anything to him." His words thickened a little, but he couldn't help it. "Tell Captain Small that I said that under the circumstances, even like everything is—Shamrock Parker would have come, just to find out."

Trav saw his hat on the floor and picked it up. Pushing between the silent pair, he made a cautious survey from the door. Without turning, he spoke to Rotan. "Is your mount handy?"

"It's back in the trees. I can get to it all right."

"Good luck. That dove call was like music to me, partner. Mary, you wait here."

He stepped from the jail doorway onto the dew-soaked grassy path, and walked rapidly toward the back of the store, where the outlines of a covered wagon showed in the dawn. As he came around to the team, a man straightened to face him.

"Are you the one driving the supplies out to the Tonks?" Trav asked briskly.

"That's me." The gaunt face showed no pleasure. "It's my hard luck for knowing a little Tonk language. Why?"

"I'm to relieve you," Trav said.

"Are you taking it out?"

"Those are the judge's orders."

The man made a resigned gesture and slouched off toward the front road. When he was out of sight around the store building, Trav seesawed the team of buckskin mustangs backward. He fought them, still backing, snake-traveling a crooked course all the way to the jail door.

"Climb over the tailgate," he called.

In a moment, Mary's voice came from quite near.

"I'm in."

"Keep low on the floor. Get something between you and the opening."

HE WHIPPED the lines sharply on the backs of the buckskin pair, and the wagon rolled out toward the road. In the thinning dawn haze the distant houses showed cookstove smoke beginning to break above the chimneys. The rifle of the driver Trav had relieved, a worn Henry, leaned against the spring seat, with an open box of cartridges handy.

In the distant first streaks of daylight he sighted a spectacular flow of movement on the grasy floor of the plain. Blue knife had his warriors in mounted formations. They were wheeling, charging, and maneuvering in assault tactics copied long ago from their savage tormentors, the Comanches and the Kiowas. Straight toward this fluid display of colored dots of a hundred feather-bedecked performers, he headed Judge Denver Smith's smooth-rolling wagon.

"Are you all right back there?" he called to Mary.

The voice that responded was almost in his ear. Mary said, "Just terribly sleepy. Are they planning to attack?"

She could see past his shoulder. He heard the fear in her voice. The feathered Tonkawas made a spine-chilling sight in the churned-up dust. He hoped the threat would keep the village on edge, and the judge's crew concentrated there. He wanted the chance to look over the judge's ranch house. Mary's words reminded Trav that he was fighting a great drowsiness himself.

"You'll be safe out here. Do you mind sleeping in a hide tepee?"

"I could sleep anywhere."

The warriors charged toward the approaching wagon. He felt Mary's hand tighten on his shoulder as he fought the team's frightened shenanigans. The damn fool Tonks! They would stampede their own grub supply, at this rate. He cursed them under his breath as he seesawed the lines, keeping the team headed for the grove.

Blue Knife must have seen the problem, for all at once the hard-riding formation swerved, half a mile out, and went yelling to the east, with guns and war spears brandished aloft. Trav worked the wagon into the first trees. He helped Mary to the ground and guided her toward the lone tepee.

As they stooped for the opening, he looked back and saw warriors whirl their ponies a mile distant, then come charging toward the wagon. Denver Smith's first installment on his ransom would hold them for a little while. Trav silently indicated a blanket for Mary, turned his back, rolled up in the other blanket, and immediately passed into the deep oblivion of dead-tired sleep. . . .

The dim light seeping into the hide tent showed the white man and the white girl sleeping off their weariness. Awakening first, Trav propped himself on his elbow and found Mary's sleep-relaxed features across the space of the tepee, where a Tonkawa blanket outlined the drawn-up curve of her slight body.

Mary stirred slightly. Her eyelids fluttered. She found him looking at her as she sent a glance around the strange interior. Remembrance flooded into her expression. She pulled the blanket tighter to her throat.

"I was too sleepy to be afraid, before. Now I am. Those Indians!"

"Mary, will you answer some questions for me now?"

She huddled into the covering of the blanket. "What do you want to know?"

"What was Raffer trying to get out of you? Why did they take you to the jail?"

"The judge!" Her eyes squeezed shut, then opened again. Her mouth tightened in bitterness.

"What were they really trying to get out of you?"

She said reluctantly, "They wanted to know about you—who you were, why you had come here, what my father had told you. Things like that, over and over."

"What did you say?"

"Just that I didn't know."

Trav nodded approval. "When I came to your house yesterday I thought I was looking for a man named Jack Hinton. I know now that your father was not the one. It's another man that I've been trying to find. Why was your father using that Jenkins name?"

Her eyes closed. He waited, but she did not speak.

"I don't know why you don't trust me," he said rather bitterly. "You ought to know by now that I mean no harm to you."

Her suspicion of him closed between them like a barrier. Not knowing how to get past it was the bad part. Through the mist of the distrust her voice came cautiously.

"You said, yesterday at our cabin, that there was something more, something good and *dirty* about the trouble that happened to you."

He looked straight into her face, not four feet away. "It was after I came back to Texas. It was the thing that put me on this chase and has kept me at it ever since. I don't aim to quit it. Did you ever hear of being drummed out of the Army? Well, it was something like that. Only this was a Ranger company, and not many of them spoke to me when I left."

"But couldn't you *explain* to them?" Her tone was huskily sympathetic.

"It was like this," he said, trying to think of the place where his troubles had had their beginning. "Bradshaw started it. He came to my captain and asked him to assign me to ride to Abilene to bring back his herd money. He had contracted with Jack Hinton to move the herd up. Maybe you knew about that. But he wanted a Ranger to bring the money back. I hope I'm not hurting your feelings by saying that. It was the way that Bradshaw wanted it."

"It was his privilege. But it hurt my father not to be trusted. But I never knew much about it. So the Rangers sent you?"

"They couldn't, officially. That was the catch. They couldn't detach a man and send him half across the world on a private errand for somebody, to bring back a big cattleman's money from another state. So Captain Small tried to do this for Bradshaw by a paper manipulation that put me on leave. He wanted to accommodate Bradshaw, you understand, and he figured to do it that way to dodge regulations.

"So when I went north, I was not under official orders or anything. I was on leave of absence. Small and Bradshaw had been friends of my father, Shamrock Parker. He had been a Ranger, and maybe that's why they picked me. Well, I got the money in Abilene. I never saw your—never saw the man who took the cattle up, nor any of the trail crew. The bank paid over the sixty thousand to me on Bradshaw's order, and I headed south. It wasn't long before I knew definitely that I was being followed."

WHEN he stopped there, Mary raised herself on her elbow like Trav, so their glances came level to each other. She said, "You don't have to tell about the ambush if you don't want to."

"Well, I'll just say this: I was shot up pretty bad. First I thought I was dying, and didn't care much, since the money was gone. The Tonks pulled me through. I lived in their village a long time—a year, the way I figure it. They taught me a lot about Indians, and I guess I taught them a little about white men's ways. I'll skip that. One day, when I had a chance, I pulled out. Do you want to know what happened when I got back to Texas?"

She murmured, "Not if it troubles you too much to tell."

"Well, it was a whole hell-fire of trouble, I can tell you that. Bradshaw had been ruined, and he killed himself. His relatives made plenty of trouble over it. The word leaked out that the Rangers had sent me, and that I had made off with the money. That put Captain Small in a bad spot with headquarters.

"All kind of rumors went around, and even the governor took a hand in it by then. Somebody's hide had to be nailed up. I don't think the Ranger headquarters knows to this day whether I lied or not. But that's a military outfit, and the military's not accustomed to being the goat in a tight place, if they can pass the buck. So they did the only thing they could to clear their skirts.

"They had a full-grown scandal on their hands, and everybody was trying to save his own neck. They kicked me out with a dishonorable discharge and told me I was damned lucky not to be tried as a criminal. The Bradshaw heirs wanted to hang me. That's what I rode back to from the Tonks, and that's what put me on the trail of Jack Hinton for all these months. Whoever pulled that ambush owes me a look at him over the sight of this Colt."

She said, "I am not blaming you for anything. Something like this had to happen, I think."

He seized at this indication of her understanding. "Then will you tell me now the things I need to know?"

Whatever she might have said was cut off by moccasin shuffles and movement at the opening. A painted face showed, a long dark arm shoved through. Mary cringed close to her cover as Trav whirled. It was only a Tonk buck bringing food to them. The buck grunted, spoke gutteral words, made a motion to include them both, and withdrew.

"What did he say?" Mary asked.

"Nothing." Trav placed the food between them.

"He must have said something."

"He thinks your my squaw. They take it we're man and wife. That's why they've given us the privacy of the chief's tepee."

He noticed the color rise in her olive cheeks, but the deep blue depths of her eyes contained a tiny smile. Her next words, murmured with a trace of timidity, startled him.

"Trav," she asked, her glance averted, "who is Bee-lah?"

He swallowed hard on a barely-chewed bite of beef. "Why do you ask that?"

"You said her name when you were asleep."

"How do you know it was a *her?*"

"Because of the way you said it."

That's the way a woman makes her own logic as she goes along, he thought. "What else did I say?"

Her reply didn't come at once, but finally she murmured, "You said my name."

"I said your name? Just—Mary?"

"You said 'Mary.' Then you said something I didn't understand. It sounded like 'twenty ponies.' "

He tried to see her more clearly in the gloom, to see if he actually had detected a small note of hidden mischievousness. Her eyes showed nothing but controlled blankness.

She added flatly, "I know a little something about Tonkawas."

"It must have been that lick on my head, I reckon. I had nightmares. The man hit me pretty hard."

He tried to eat again. After a minute, the voice came shyly from the other blanket. "You haven't said who Bee-lah was."

His questioning of Mary had meandered clear off the trail. You could not drag a thing out of her against her wishes, but she was as tenacious with her own tracking of fact as a badger on a moonlight forage.

Almost angrily, because she flustered him, he said, "You haven't told me anything, either.

How much longer will it be before we begin to trust one another?"

He was immediately sorry. His tone had been gruff, which was not what he had intended. The smelly beef chunks on the hot stone slab were forgotten. When there was no further word from across the little distance between them, he changed position until he saw her eyes reflecting the particles of stray sunlight seeping in.

Her face was shadowed and a little afraid. She was afraid of this day, perhaps, of people white and red, and of the world around. But he saw courage, too, as if her being afraid was being met by something, some steely strength inside reserved for meeting fear, strong enough to overcome whatever she had to face.

The space between them closed to nothing as he twisted his shoulders in a slide across the grass-tufted floor. His body stretched to the small blanketed lump of her, and his arm reached across her shoulder. She did not shrink from his touch, nor could he tell if she breathed at all. He kissed her, once, gently.

Her lips did not respond. He drew back to his own place, his mind in a flutter of confusion. The feel of her mouth remained warm on his. A disturbance at the opening rescued him from the jumble of words from which he was trying to choose the right ones to say to her.

HE RECOGNIZED the paint-daubed ugliness of Fox-One-Eye. Fox did not come all the way in, but poked his tattooed shoulders through the opening and grunted Tonkawa words. His jabber ended with a leering grin and a gesture toward Mary. Trav was glad that she did not understand Tonk—not Fox's words nor the angered ones of his own as he shot a reply that sent the one-eyed warrior away in sullen retreat.

She must have guessed at the implication, for she did not ask him the obvious question. Instead, she sat upright and said wearily, "I want to go back to the settlement now. I will ride in alone. You should start away from here."

"You're not afraid to go back?"

"I'm not afraid. I will not let them scare me away from my father's funeral. What can they do to me now?"

Too quickly he shot the question. "Who is the judge, Mary? Why won't he lock you up again?"

"Because it's too late. I've been with you."

"Then you—"

"Please!" She turned away. "Don't badger me! Good-bye, Trav."

"We're both going back!" he snapped. "You're going to the funeral, which is proper. I'm going to make one—my own or somebody's. I'm not completely alone in this!"

"Not alone?" she murmured. "You mean the Rangers—"

"No!" He motioned to the opening. "Them, out there—the Tonks."

She caught his arm, and her eyes lifted. There was a look in them as if she were to make him understand what had been deep inside her. "I might be able to help a little too," she whispered. "I could get the nesters."

"Hasn't the judge got them buffaloed?"

"Please—we must go now."

"All right. I think I can bluff Denver Smith a little while longer." He managed a grin to reassure her. He could see the screwed-up resolution in her pinched face as she took a deep breath and walked out among the Indian warriors. "When we go to the wagon, just walk close behind me. Don't look to the right or left. If they mix some English words in what they may start saying about us, don't hear that either."

Her quick intuition for what the words might be silenced her, clamping down on the "Why?" he almost could see form on her lips. She managed a smile to match his own. Demurely, she stood aside as a sqaw would have done, to permit him to walk first from Blue Knife's smoky shelter into the sunlighted maze of staring, painted faces.

That afternoon in Brazos Pass, they buried the nester known to them as Gus Jenkins. The remote boothill cemetery bloomed with calico colors relieving the drabness of its red sand. The rites were brief, the procedure simple, the formalities done in short order. The handful of nesters went through their roles reverently, methodically, stoically.

Sliff Cage, aided by the promptings of his diminutive wife in the lags of his forgetfulness, said the concluding words. To the people in the group, respectfully apart from the dead

man's daughter, the prairies had simply touched a frost upon a life they barely knew.

Mary Hinton, standing alone in her borrowed dress, thought that the accommodating nester from the north had made the service impressive and appropriate. A few of the nester women, departing, came close, and touched her arm and murmured a word or two. She barely heard these, just as she barely saw the judge plodding away, passing Trav Parker.

She was left there beside the red clay mound, as the nesters made haste to return to the houses where the judge's men still held their rifles in readiness for the Tonkawas. The last hand to touch her arm was a hand that stayed, and Mary finally turned blankly to see its owner. She looked into the green eyes of Wilda Smith.

Wilda's painted lips trembled. "He was a righteous man."

Mary drew back. "You used to say he was a hard man."

"He was hard with me, yes." Wilda murmured.

"But you made your decision," Mary said slowly, looking at the mound and not at Wilda. "I don't think anything could really change you, ever—not even death."

For a moment Wilda gave way to a seizure of emotion and clung to Mary. That passed, and she stood apart, dabbing at her eyes.

"You say he was a hard man," Mary told her steadfastly. "Well, the world knows you as a hard woman. You turned into something he never intended, could never understand. Yet he wouldn't give up. He always hoped, I guess. We lived up here just so that he could sometimes see you. He was thinking of our mother, I know—like it was a debt he thought he owed her and tried to pay in the best way he could."

Wilda painstakingly tucked in wind-loosened wisps of her hair. Through a hairpin held in her teeth she said carelessly, "Don't get pious with me."

Mary's eyes blazed. "You were born vicious, and *bad!*"

This brought a quick brittle laugh from the older woman. "I wasn't going to be a poor man's brat all my life!"

Mary said helplessly, "He never understood you. I feel as if I almost never knew you. You've been just—a name."

Wilda shrugged. "The bright lights of San Antonio were born in my blood, I guess. You and I were different, Mary. When our mother went back to the footlights, it took me and her a million miles away from your stinking cattle herds and boiling *frijoles* in some nester shack. She took me, he kept you. You've had your life, and welcome to it. We had ours, and I grew up the way I wanted."

The last straggle of nesters disappeared down the weedy path past the fringe of houses and into the one village road.

Coming up in the next issue

FIGHT OR RUN!

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A Magazine-Length Novel

By NOEL LOOMIS

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The man who killed Kathy's husband was capable of any evil . . . and Joe Edison had to fight him—alone

Beginning an Exciting Serial

By MACK SAUNDERS

MARY HINTON drew her small body into a taut shell of solitude, as if making herself physically distant from the other woman. "You found what you wanted," she said. "Money, position, and power. You were never like a sister to me."

"You left out the most important thing."

"I know."

"I wanted men and attention. Our mother always told me I was beautiful. And I've had those things. You wouldn't know about that, you're so backwoods and straight-laced!"

"How many of them had to pay with their lives, like *he* did, so that you and Denver Smith could live like lords?"

"It wasn't the way I thought it would be," Wilda retorted harshly. "But I'm in it now, and a long time ago the moment passed when I could have turned back."

"You're his prisoner, just as much as the rest of the little people out here are."

Wilda shrugged. "Maybe I am, maybe not. He's not the only smart one. I have some brains, too. If he thinks he can keep me cooped up forever just to get drunk and go to bed with, he's liable to get a surprise!"

"You can't get away!" Mary spoke triumphantly. "You *are* his prisoner. You wanted men, and there's not one around him that would dare to come within reach of you, or give you a good look, not with what they know about the judge!"

"That's what you think," Wilda said cunningly. "I may find my way out of here sooner than you think. Then San Antonio, Kansas City, the whole world, where there are *men*, and excitement!"

"That's what you want most?"

"I want *people!* I'll tell you something: I'm using that young black-listed Ranger to help me get away. He's the only man I've seen in a year that I'd look to for help. And I've got him eating out of my hand right now!"

Mary looked stunned. "Trav Parker?"

"Don't you butt in on him! If you have that in mind, I'm warning you!" Wilda stared down hard at Mary's blush of color. She spoke slowly, in accents of deadly viciousness. "If I so much as say one word to Denver, that young man will never be seen alive again. Don't you ever forget that!"

Mary murmured, "No, you haven't changed. One ambush was not enough."

Wilda shrugged. "I don't think Denver would harm you," she said in parting. "But you'd better be careful, and keep your mouth shut. *Nester brat!*"

With Wilda gone, Mary stood alone a little while and the grief drained out of her, was gone, and something intensely new took its place. This was a surge of slow anger, almost recklessness. It made her small shoulders square back, her chin rise with resolution. She headed for Rigsby's house. There she found the Drains and some of the nester families. Rigsby, she thought, she could trust.

As the circle of appropriately sympathetic stares fell upon Mary, Mrs. Drain began a voluable flow of post-funeral condolescences. Her mouth was silenced while still open from the shock of Mary's blazing eyes and her impatient gesture.

"I don't want your talk!" she flared at them. "Where's your *backbone?* Which one of you wants to be next out there with Gus Jenkins? We're rid of Cabbo and Eckhart, but Raffer is still alive—and the judge, and all the others. When are you going to have the guts to do something?"

A sun-peeled little man tried to speak soothingly. "Now, you're just a mite upset, child."

"And you, Glid Ellis, are a mite cowed and spineless! We're all barely existing on our little nester spreads, by sufferance of the Big Man, almost in sight of all the grass in the world. Grass that *he* hoards, and won't let you touch!" Imploringly, she turned her impassioned gaze from one downcast face to another. "You're like a bunch of prairie dogs in a hole, afraid to breathe because the coyote pack is waiting!"

Ellis was mildly defensive. "I'd say the judge's army and the Comanches aren't exactly a little coyote pack, Mary. What chance do we have to move in on that grass to the west, with all those guns standing at our back?"

"You're just upset." Mrs. Drain tried to be consoling again. But for almost the first time, her husband publicly differed with her.

"Mary is right," Drain said hoarsely. "I'm sick of it. I'm stinking sick of it and I hate myself!"

Another man nodded reluctant agreement. "The others just stood, the way I heard it. They were to scared to move. Some stranger had to go after Cabbo and even the score for Jenkins's murder.

Shrewdly, her mind racing now, her veins red hot from a fever of vindictive purpose strange to her, Mary Hinton watched them, calculating the slow turnings of their cautious minds.

"You must have had some courage," she said evenly, "just to come out here. Life would have been easier for you east of the Brazos. This simply can't be what you chose to do, to push out from civilization only to run into one big crazy man and turn into slaves!"

A nester wife complained unhappily, "Young woman, you're just trying to stir up trouble."

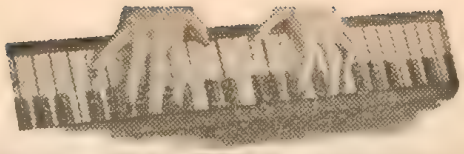
Mary whirled upon her. "I'll tell you like a man, Mrs. Ellis. You're damned right I'm trying to stir up trouble! Gus Jenkins was a good man, but my mother was a bad woman—a saloon singer, if you want to know. There's some good and some bad in me, and the bad is breaking out. I hope I shock you! I'll tell you to your face that you're a bunch of cowards clear down to your fingernails. Somebody needs to talk like a man; there's not a *man* in all you homesteaders lumped together!"

IN THEIR hurt faces she saw the end of her strength to push them further. In another second her emotions would overwhelm her ability to maintain her first hot drunkenness of hate and she would go to pieces, like a little girl, and be shaking on somebody's shoulder with the pent-up sobs that wanted to gush out.

In that tottering moment, when the room and the silent people, blurred crazily before her, the footstep and voice at the doorway were like a reinforcement coming in time to shoulder a weight that overwhelmed her.

"She's told you the truth," Trav Parker said quietly. "You don't look to me like people who'll stomach this Cabbo business forever. I've heard a man's talk handed to you just now. Mary's told you what I'll bet you've been telling yourselves, only it had to be this

[*Turn page*]



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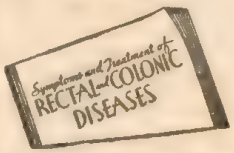

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girl who said it out loud for you." He came into the room. "Well, are you going to stand around all your lives thinking about what she handed you, or do you mean to do something with it?"

"That's no business of yours, stranger," one of the men growled.

"Oh, but it is," Mary said quickly. The fine points of absolute truth went flying from her conscience, and she didn't care. "He's here because it *is* his business. Don't you even *know?*"

"Know what?" Rigsby frowned.

"He's a Texas Ranger!" Mary almost shouted, her voice hysterically triumphant. "He's Travis Parker of the Rangers, and we have help now." Glibly, Mary added a flood of sly fabrications. "A whole battalion of Rangers is coming. This man is here to break up the *comanchero* crowd. He's Captain Trav Parker, I tell you! The other Ranger, Rotan, was the one who killed Cabbo."...

Trav shot her a shocked look, then closed his mouth grimly and said nothing. Where was the timid nester girl who had washed dishes in the Hinton shack yesterday? He faced the others, and took in turn their cautious scrutiny.

"Who'll start organizing the homesteaders now?" he asked. "You, Drain?"

"Not him," Mrs. Drain said pitiously.

"Shut up!" Drain snorted. "I'm thinking!"

The breeze-rocked door drifted back and a new shadow moved on the threshold. Trav caught the tightened expression of one of the men in the circle across the room, turned, and met the dead-white stare of Raffer.

"The judge wants to see you," Raffer said tonelessly. "He's waiting for your report on the Tonks."

Trav nodded amiably. "It looks bad, Raffer," he said. He moved to the doorway. Pete and Brister emerged on each side, and Raffer fell in behind him.

As they filed off the low plank porch, Brister shouldered hard against Trav with his off-gun side. To Pete, on the other side, and Raffer, gliding behind, Brister muttered, "I'm not forgetting that the sneaking Indian cut a rein on me and ruined a good bridle." He bumped Trav hard again with his shoulder, crowding him all the way.

At the doorway of the Brazos Palace, Raffer grunted, "All the way back."

Entering the judge's office, Trav squinted for a first quick appraisal of Denver Smith's present mood. The big muscular figure who stared back at him from behind the desk was exposing no cards at this stage. His expression was an absolute blank.

"I sent you to talk with those Indians," Smith said without preliminaries. "I've been waiting all day for your report."

Trav, watching him, sought to move toward the wall to his right, to maneuver Raffer and his men in a group he could see all at one time. But Raffer moved alongside him, and they wound up nearly side by side, with the other three across the room.

To hell with this, Trav thought. All at once the flaring of Irish temperament, which he'd tried to fight down all his life, made its bad medicine. The result now, as at other times, was a reckless defiance that played fast and loose with the consequences.

Trav's mouth worked to answer Denver Smith, but only for a split second. He did not like the words, the tone, nor the man.

Almost as if he and Smith were old friends, secret confederates in this, he slouched lazily past the desk and said, "In a minute, Smitty," without looking. He sauntered on across the rug until his chest was two inches from Brister's wet open mouth.

"You roughed me up a little, Brister, coming down Rigsby's porch."

Brister closed his mouth and moved his hand gunward. He made a grunting sound of uncertainty.

"The ladies saw it. I don't like to be shoved in front of ladies."

Trav knocked Brister down. Then he picked Brister up. He did it with his left hand, knotting it satisfactorily in Brister's shirt front. He gave no notice to Pete, who was nearest, nor any of the others, for he simply let it be understood that they would not move just then. Brister's head still sagged, and his eyes drooped closed.

Trav balanced him at half an arm's length, as if holding an unpropped scarecrow. Then he delivered the same fist, the same five knuckles of jagged flintrock, into the same place on Brister's chin. This dropped Brister

back to the soft rug a foot or two farther off than where he had lain before.

"He didn't exactly crowd me," Trav confided to his good personal friend, the judge, rubbing a little at his paining knuckles, "but it must have looked that way to the women. If you run any kind of an organization, Denver, you have to teach these men of yours manners."

For all his assurance, Denver Smith looked hypnotized. Trav was ready, too, for when the paralysis died off and Smith's mind started churning.

"Now about those Indians. They're likely to hit you any minute. I can deal with 'em, and I'm the only man in your outfit who can. If you lock up either me or Mary Jenkins in that two-bit jail again, the damned Tonks can have your whole clan for breakfast, for all I care."

BY NOW the judge had pushed his chair back, and Raffer had a gun in his hand. The judge stared at Trav, then down to Brister's inert body, and up again.

Trav grinned. "Judge, I'm not missing anybody back in Texas where I came from, and nobody's missing me. This looks like a nice little place to settle down in. There aren't many people coming through to recognize a man." He settled a leg over the judge's desk, fingered for his tobacco sack, remembered he had given it to Fire Feather, and rubbed his chin instead.

"He cut my bridle reins," Raffer said tonelessly. "He roughed up Guerra at the jail. He locked up Bumble like the fat fool he was, and took off with the gal for the Indian camp. He's due for a trial."

The judge frowned at his marshal. "I'm not forgetting that. But those men don't count just now. I take it, Parker, that you're on the dodge and are ready to join my outfit. Is that what you're saying?"

"I want to say what job I get." Trav stared speculatively at Raffer.

"What job do you want?"

"His job, Judge—Raffer's."

Raffer's blank eyes showed their first expression in the way he jerked a protesting look toward Smith. "He'll have to kill me to get

[*Turn page*]

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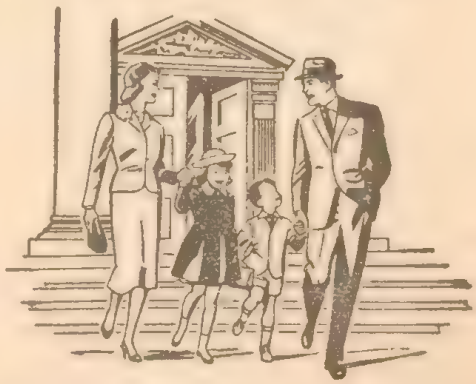

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it," Raffer said. "I like what I'm doing."

"He just might be able to."

"Oh, hell." Trav stood up. "We don't have to work out everything now. Let's lay it on the line. You know I'm a busted-out Ranger. Maybe you even know what a bird named Jack Hinton did to me once in the Territory, just when I had myself a chunk of money and was on my way to have a setup to my liking. What the hell's all the arguing about? Let's do some business.

"First, the Tonks. I've all but licked Blue Knife's moccasins. They've come a long way to put on the last war they have under their belts, and they know it's the last. They don't mind what happens to 'em because they're goners anyhow, and they'd rather go out in a good melee again, with plenty of blood and yelling and houses burning and white women to drag off, than to die an inch at a time back in the Territory. That's what we have to contend with."

"It's what I was afraid of," the judge admitted. "All right, Parker, go to work. What's the next move?"

Trav shrugged. "I'll go back and dicker with 'em some more. The stuff you sent out this morning helped a little. They'll talk more sense on full bellies."

The judge still had other things on his mind. Trav could see them working. One came out now. Disarmingly attempted, his words nevertheless sounded worried. "You hustled that girl off to the Tonk camp. What did she tell you?"

Trav tried an insolent grin. "You're getting a little personal."

The judge was having none of that. "I asked, what did she tell you?"

There was danger in the man still. Trav played it the way he had started it. "If you have to pin me down, she told me *no!*"

Smith's features crinkled slightly in understanding. Pete chuckled appreciatively. But then the judge went grim again. "What else did she tell you besides *no?*"

"She also doesn't care to talk."

Smith nodded. "What kind of questions were you asking her?"

Trav blew smoke. "About the setup here. What the trouble was between her old man and Cabbo, and what Raffer had her in jail for. She just plain doesn't bed double, and she plain doesn't talk. She's scared of her own shadow."

The judge rasped at Raffer, "Does that stack up with the way you figure?"

"She sure as hell doesn't talk," Raffer agreed. "I don't know about the other. If I ever get her in jail again I'll try."

"You won't." Trav stood up. Raffer moved his gun hand.

"Why won't he?" Smith asked sharply.

"Because she's my property!" Trav snarled. To demonstrate his simulated anger, he sidestepped over and gave Brister's inert foot an aggravated kick.

"What was the big talk in Rigsby's house?" Raffer wanted to know. "Everybody went mighty dumb when I walked in."

"Raffer," Trav said, smiling, and he dared to slap the marshal good-naturedly on the shoulder, "when you poke that face of yours into a crowd, they naturally go dumb. You scare the hell out of them."

The judge had seen and heard enough. He motioned impatiently. "Raffer, take Joe and Pete and go check up on all the houses. Lug Brister out of here and throw some water on him. Parker, you stay a minute."

When they were alone, Trav felt his fingers twitching, the sweat soaking his armpits. His strength felt drained, and he wondered if he could keep the sudden all-over weakness from showing.

He had done his best. He had outtalked Smith, challenged Raffer, insulted Mary, and planted himself as best he could into the judge's acceptance. It was filthy work, and he wanted fresh air. Instead, the judge stuck a bottle in his hand.

"You look as if you need a little of this stuff."

"Thanks." Trav took a long swallow. It burnt good, as Rotan would have said. "Are you having a drink too?"

"Yeah." The judge was already pouring himself a glass. Trav watched, waiting for him to stop when it was a reasonable three fingers. The amber liquid kept gurgling out the neck, until the tumbler was red half to the rim. The judge drank it in two practiced breaths. "It takes a lot of this to make me sleep. I never know what's going on behind my back."

"Comanche trouble?"

"That and other kinds—hired hand trouble, nester trouble." He paused, fixing a dull red stare on his new henchman. "And wife trouble."

"That's what they say about this side of the Brazos. That's why I came up here. I'll tell you some time about what they did to me down south." Trav reached for his hat. "You got no kick, Denver. You have quite a setup here. I want some of it. I have a disease called liking money." He thumbed his gunbelt. "Maybe you need more than another hand. Maybe you need a partner."

The judge eyed him a long time, with nothing escaping. Whatever he saw made him murmur, "I just hope you don't have a disease called doublecrossing, Parker. It's the thing I cure best."

Without a fraction of pause, Trav answered, trying to pretend he had heard Denver wrong. "I don't go for warming my hands at another man's fire, *amigo*."

IT MIGHT have worked, might have proved that he had misunderstood. Maybe it didn't. Maybe the judge was an actor, too. Smith's expression told him nothing. The judge only said, "I wasn't referring to my wife. But you can consider I meant that, too."

For the time being, at least, Trav had maintained his freedom. It could have been worse. They could have chained him in that rock jail, with Smith working out his own fate with the Tonkawas. Captain Small had said a good Ranger sometimes had to be a good actor.

Blue Knife had said somewhat the same, more obscurely, when he once told Trav that the Indian wouldn't let a white man know what he was thinking because the Indian was actually something else *from what he was* and didn't know, himself. As he stepped to the doorway, Trav turned back. Smith was still standing, a newly poured tumbler of whisky in his hand, staring thoughtfully.

"If I'm not around for two-three days, don't get worried. It takes time to make peace talk with those monkeys. You just keep all your forces here and keep 'em alert. The sure time of an Indian attack is the exact minute you're sure they won't. One more thing,

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Judge. I expect Mary Jenkins to be healthy, happy and footloose when I get back."

The judge wet his lips and said nothing, then raised the glass. Trav stalked at a medium walk through the echoing emptiness of the long saloon room. His boots made a slightly louder impact upon the polished wide planking than necessary, but the sound of free walking was enjoyable to his hearing. It was better than crawling through brush, cautious not to let a rock slide so much as an inch. Joe was back at the doorway with his rifle.

"My mount's walking on his knees," Trav said to him. "Go get me two live ones at the stable, one saddled and one roped to lead, while I stock up on a few things at the store." Before the guard could decide otherwise, Trav added with a good-natured grin, "Want to ride to the Tonk camp with me, Joe?"

Joe looped an arm around his rifle and headed for the corral. "Not me," he muttered.

He walked across the road to get the two horses for the judge's new lieutenant. The new lieutenant flicked a look to the distant north and Rigsby's house, hesitated only an instant, then walked on across the sandy wagon tracks to the judge's store.

Fifteen minutes later he rode a fresh mustang and led a spare pony, on a short rope, past the houses, into the prairie, toward the smoke haze of the Tonkawa camp. In his mind's eye he could already see Blue Knife's lone tepee. The inside of it, as he saw it now, looked uncommonly lonely.

The judge fastened the bedroom door behind him with one hand, not turning his back. "You forgot my flower today." He knocked lightly on his empty lapel with a mighty fist. Wilda froze. He took a few steps into the room, his light-footed movements silent on the rug. "Maybe I ought to have you arrested for neglecting your duty."

The whisky odor snaked over the room. Wilda, as if recognizing a sign, exclaimed, "Please—you're not planning to hold court tonight." The statement that started angrily ended in a questioning plea. "Not after all that's happened today?"

"What's the matter? Did the funeral upset you?"

"Everything's upset me."

"I can see." His eyes burned brighter. "You're so upset you forgot and put on riding clothes to go to bed in." His look drifted over her whipcord pants and open-throated shirt. "I might just hold court, after all."

"Who?" Wilda breathed.

"Him."

"This Parker?"

"You know, I've always hated the smart ones, the ones who think they've got me fooled."

"Who thinks they've got you fooled, Denver?" She tried to make her voice too light. The judge's look went below her surface and plumbed the insides. Wilda said, "With all those Indians out there and the nesters in town, it's no time to hold a drunken orgy of a trial downstairs, and you know it! One more screaming night of that is more than I can stand."

"He wouldn't scream very loud. He's a big, brave Ranger. Real smart."

He sauntered a step or two toward her. Fear came into her widened eyes. Nervously, she rubbed at the open collar of her shirt. "As soon as he gets rid of the Tonks," the judge mumbled. "Just as soon as those cannibals are gone."

"But not tonight!" She added quickly, smiling approval, "I'm so glad you won't have a court tonight."

"He wouldn't be so handsome after a trial, eh? He wouldn't interest you much!"

She flung out an indignant denial of interest in Trav Parker. He extended a heavy hand and patted her shoulder. His eyes burned strangely, and his whisky sweat made a warm sour smell between them.

"So the Toast of San Antonio is a little upset, eh? Seems to me you've been that way for quite a while, come to think of it."

"It's been a bad day. After all, he *was* my father!"

Mockingly, he lifted his black thicket of eyebrows. "Why didn't you go live with him in that nester shack, then, like he begged you to—with that stand-offish kid sister and boiled *frijoles* three times a day?" His mind whipped to something else. Muttering, he looked vacantly around the room. "I ought to hold court for her, too."

"Why Mary? She doesn't know anything."

"She knows more than you think. I'd like

to find out. He either lied about her talking or else he scared her off. Everything's fishy. Damn those Tonks!" He savagely tore at his hair. "If I ever get them out of here, I'll fishhook the truth out of him." He ran his fevered gaze up and down his wife. Wilda stood her ground. Smith said amusedly, "You think I'm crazy."

DOGGEDLY, she met his stare. "Just when you get whiskied up and hold a court. Then you're inhuman, you and Raffer!"

He looked at her almost blankly for a long moment, then shook his head a little. "I hate smart people," he said again, "like this Parker that's come hounddogging for something, like a woman who puts on riding clothes instead of a nightgown."

Abruptly, he stalked around the end of the bed. He stopped before her wide-drawered oak dresser and looked at something. Her breathing behind him became audible. They both stared down at the tell-tale jumble of white fabric protruding from a drawer, as if it had been hurriedly closed. Pushing her out of his way, he took three long strides to the edge of the bed, groped under it with a searching boot toe, and kicked out the suitcase. With another foot movement, he kicked back the hinged top and exposed her packed garments.

She had come close behind him. "It was in case we had to—run from the Indians, to go to the ranch."

He threw his massive shoulders back, tilted his huge head, and laughed silently. Then the laugh abruptly cut off. He looked down at Wilda, whose arms hung limply. Her head was bowed.

"Going somewhere?" he whispered.

With an oath he snarled through clenched bared teeth, he twisted his mammoth fist into her shirt front, yanked downward in one powerful stroke, and tore the shirt and lace-edged white camisole apart on her upper body. She stood mute, her head down and her full white breasts bared while he ripped off the rest of the tattered fragments of cloth.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

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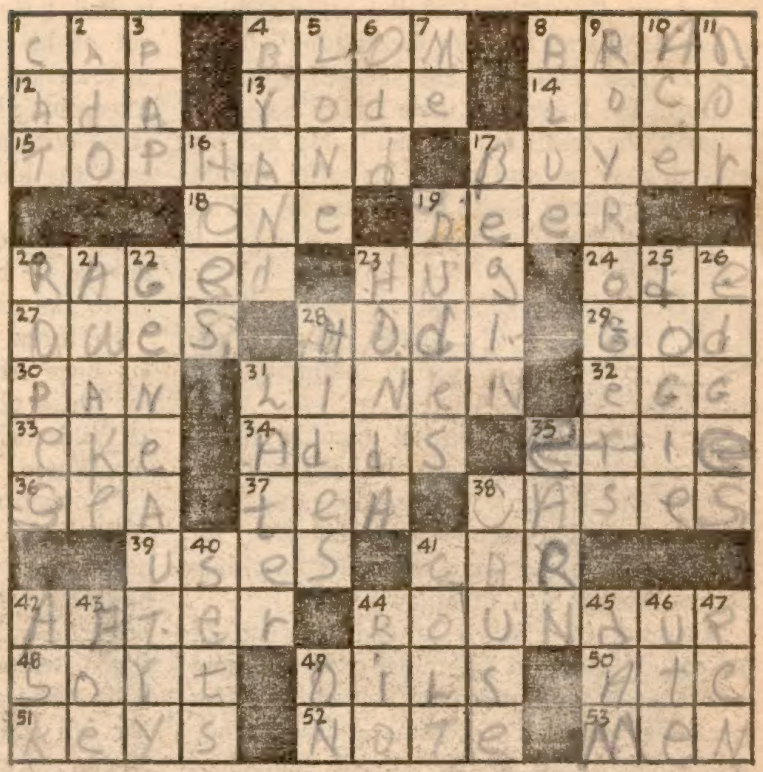
MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Boy's hat
4 To move, as wind
8 Breakfast cereal
12 Orange drink
13 Went on horseback
14 Poisonous western weed
15 Head cowboy
17 Purchaser
18 Half of two
19 Antlered animal
20 Stormed
23 To embrace
24 Lyric poem
27 Is in debt
28 Ice cream drink
29 Male deity
30 Cooking vessel
31 Flaxen fabric
32 Hen fruit
33 To piece out
34 Sums up
35 Lake bordering Ohio
36 Ocean
37 England's drink
38 Boxes
39 Utilizes
41 Automobile
42 Later in time than
44 Gathering of cattle
48 To classify
49 Lubricates
50 Dined
51 Lock openers
52 Short letter
53 Cowboys

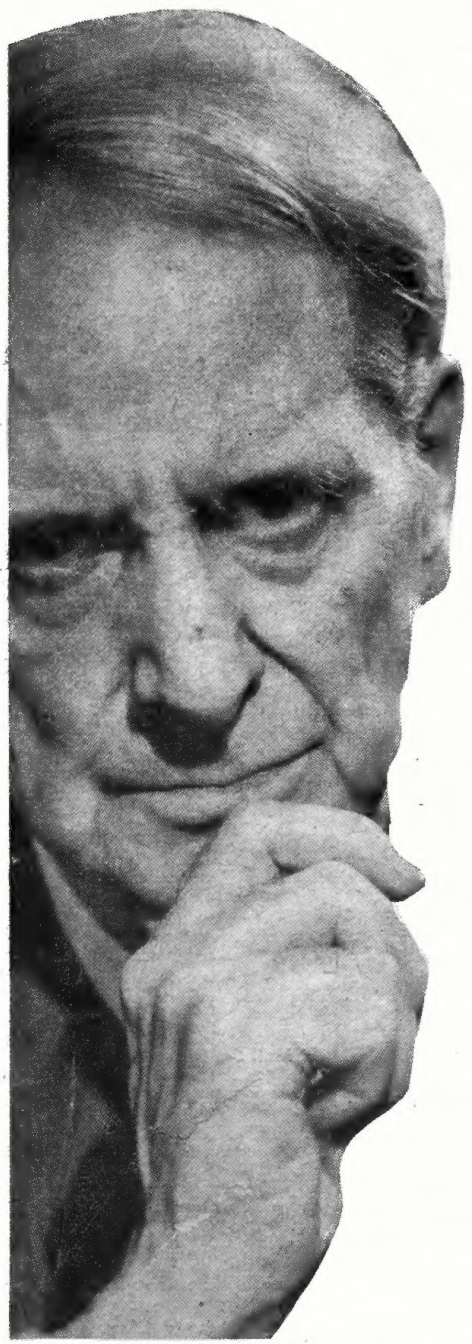
DOWN

1 Mouse catcher
2 "Much — About Nothing"
3 Liveliness (slang)
4 Owner's mark on cattle
5 The — Ranger
6 Peculiar
7 You and I
8 Red, white and —
9 Cowboy who rides Trigger (full name)
10 Top card
11 And not
16 Garden tools
17 Started
19 Would-be cowboys
20 Lariats
21 Not sleeping
22 Cowboy who rides Champion (full name)
23 Lariat's metal eyelet
25 Motherless calf
26 Borders
28 Outer portions
31 Afterwards
35 To work for
38 Reason, motive
40 Matched groups
41 Young horse
42 To inquire
43 Enemy
44 The — Grande
45 Water barrier
46 Indian of Utah
47 Writing implement
49 Not off

B	R	A	N	D		P	I	L	G	R	I	M
R	O	D	E	O		A	M	E	R	I	C	A
A	P	E		G	A	S	P		E	D	E	N
Y	E	S		I	T	S		N	E	E	D	Y
			W	E	E		S	O	N			
L	E	V	I	S		P	A	W		T	A	N
O	V	E	N		D	A	D		S	O	L	O
W	E	T		F	A	T		S	T	E	E	R
			R	O	Y		B	A	Y			
O	T	H	E	R		H	A	D		L	E	O
A	R	E	A		H	E	R	D		O	L	D
R	A	N	C	H	E	R		L	A	S	S	O
S	Y	S	T	E	M	S		E	N	T	E	R

Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

To The Man With
HERNIA
Who Can Not Submit to Surgery



THE MAN condemned to live with rupture, all too often faces a grim future.

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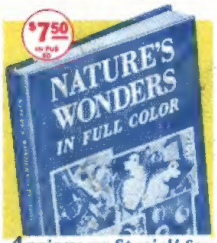

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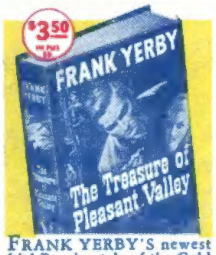

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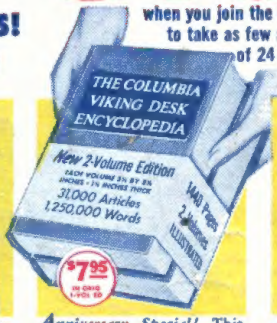

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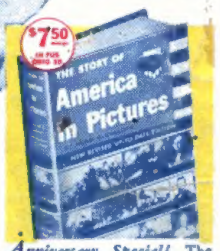

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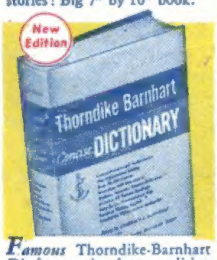

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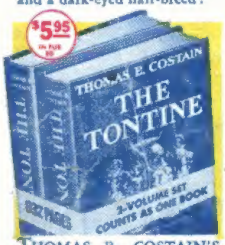

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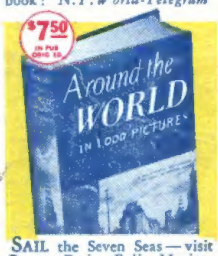

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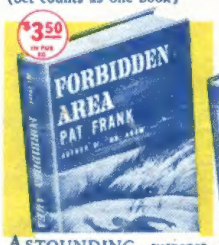

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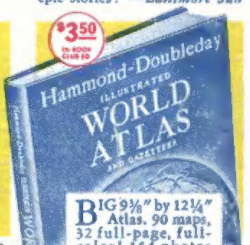

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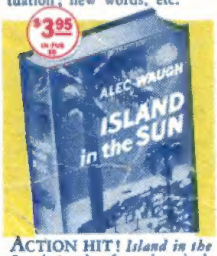

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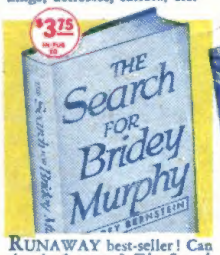

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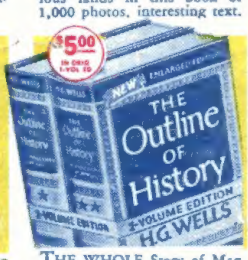

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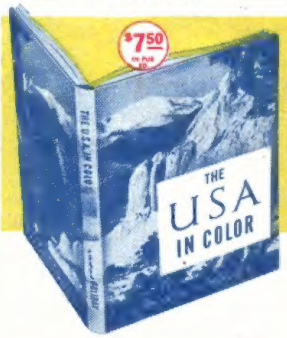

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